

JUNE 2010 £4.50

EDGE

NINTENDO | SONY | MICROSOFT | PC | HANDHELD | CO... NE

Little Big Planet 2

PlayStation 3 tools up for the next generation of Play, Create, Share

Reviewed

Super Mario Galaxy 2
WarioWare DIY
Lost Planet 2
Split Second
Cave Story
Alan Wake
Skate 3

Bulletstorm

The designers of Gears and Painkiller declare war on the FPS

The Halo effect

Hands-on with Reach – plus the story behind the legendary original

Miyamoto on Miyamoto

Nintendo's creative mastermind discusses 30 years of innovation





Taking a look at the many factors involved in the game-making process has always been part of **Edge**'s remit, but this issue is a little more focused on the nuts and bolts than usual. With *LittleBigPlanet 2* on the cover, how could it not be? Here is a follow-up to a game that has done more than any other in history to encourage console owners to try their hands at creation.

Thanks to his deftly engineered charisma, it didn't take long for Sackboy to earn a place in the hearts of PS3 owners, but Media Molecule's expansion of his potential while holding on to his home-made charms is little short of remarkable. Our report from the Guildford-based studio, detailing the breadth of its new vision, begins on p48.

On p72 we focus on Microsoft's recent X48 Game Camp event, which saw teams of students compete in a 48-hour game-making challenge. It's a story of fast food, faster coding and, crucially, collaboration, and details the kind of tactics Microsoft is employing in a bid to nurture the talent capable of creating the next *Halo*. As for the first *Halo*, on p80 we talk to Bungie staff about how they made one of the finest games of the decade.

For the sake of balance, we also look at the making of a game that sits at the other end of the critical scale. The pioneering Mega CD title *Ground Zero Texas* was in many ways a bolder enterprise than *Halo*, and that's one reason why, as its dev team recalls, it was a troubled production throughout (see p110).

It's not the kind of failure associated with one of gaming's most experienced talents, Shigeru Miyamoto, who talks us through some of the highlights of his career (see p8) and offers a little insight into the creation of *Super Mario Galaxy 2*, which is reviewed on p90. If you're thinking about exploring *LittleBigPlanet 2*'s potential and looking for inspiration, you'll see that Nintendo's latest Mario adventure isn't a bad starting point.



EDGE

Future Publishing, 30 Monmouth Street, Bath, BA1 2BW
Telephone: +44 (0)1225 442244
Fax: +44 (0)1225 732275
Email: edge@futurenet.com
Edge website: www.edge-online.com

PEOPLE ON EDGE
Tony Mott editor-in-chief
Alex Wiltshire online editor
Ian Evenden production editor
Richard Stanton features editor
Craig Owens writer
David Valjalo writer
Christophe Kagotani Tokyo bureau
Darren Phillips art editor
Andrew Hind deputy art editor

CONTRIBUTORS
Matthew Castle, Mike Channell, N'Gai Croal, Martin Davies, Christian Donlan, Nathan Ditum, Alexander Gambotto-Burke, Duncan Harris, Leon Hurley, Richard McCormick, Andy Ounsted, Steven Poole, Jamie Russell, Graham Smith, Quintin Smith, Randy Smith, Keith Stuart, William Wiles

ADVERTISING
Jas Rai advertising manager (jas.rai@futurenet.com)
Guy Jackson sales executive
Poorvi Smith advertising director
Advertising phone 0207 042 4219

Ian Miller group art director
Robin Abbott creative director
Matthew Williams design director
Jim Douglas editorial director

ADVERTISING
Jas Rai advertising manager
Guy Jackson sales executive
Poorvi Smith advertising director
Advertising phone 0207 042 4219

MARKETING
Tom Acton marketing campaign manager
James Kick brand marketing manager
Esther Gardiner promotions executive

CIRCULATION
Stuart Agnew trade marketing manager
Matt Cooper trade marketing executive
Rachael Cock trade marketing director
John Lawton international account manager (john.lawton@futurenet.com)

PRINT & PRODUCTION
Frances Twentyman production co-ordinator
Rose Griffiths production manager
Richard Mason head of production
Colin Polis Future Plus buyer

LICENSING
Tim Hudson head of international licensing

FUTURE PUBLISHING LIMITED
James Binns publishing director
Simon Wear chief operating officer
Robert Price chief executive

SUBSCRIPTIONS
Iain Russell subscriptions product manager
Phone our UK hotline on 0844 848 2852
Phone our International hotline on +44 (0) 1604 251045
Subscribe online at www.myfavouritemagazines.co.uk

Printed in the UK by William Gibbons.
Covers printed by Grange, Brighton, East Sussex.
Distributed in the UK by Seymour Distribution Ltd
2 East Poultry Avenue, London, EC1A 9PT.
(0207 429 4000)

"No, I've been nervous lots of times."



A member of the Audit Bureau of Circulations
29,007
January–December 2009

Future produces carefully targeted magazines, websites and events for people with a passion. Our portfolio includes more than 180 magazines, websites and events and we export or license our publications to 90 countries around the world.

Future plc is a public company quoted on the London Stock Exchange (symbol: FUTR).
www.futureplc.com

Chief Executive: Stevie Spring
Non-executive Chairman: Roger Parry
Group Finance Director: John Bowman
Tel +44 (0)20 7042 4000 (London)
Tel +44 (0)1225 442244 (Bath)



CONTENTS

JUNE

This month

Every month

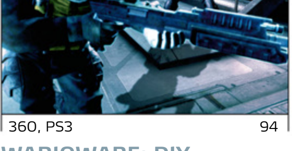


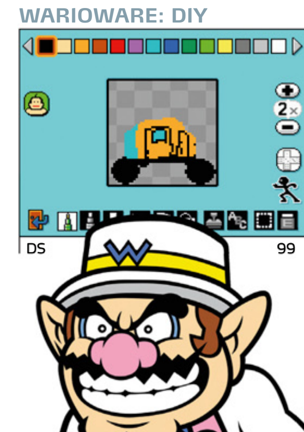
CONTENTS
CONTINUED

Hype

Review













START







Photography: Nick Wilson

INTERVIEW

Nintendo's star property

The man behind some of the gaming world's favourite icons discusses his sparkling career

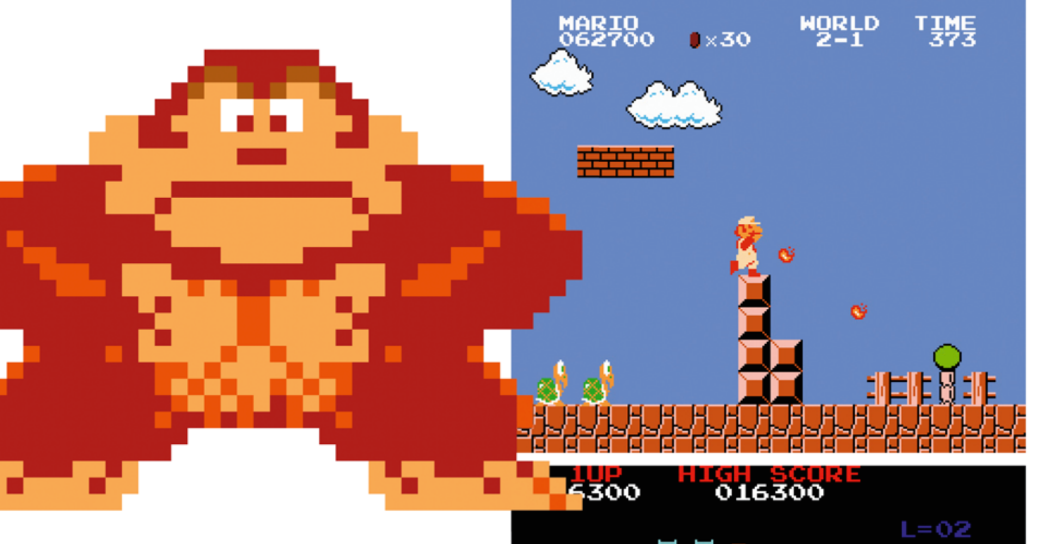
You don't need to read another introduction to **Shigeru Miyamoto**: his career highlights are etched in the mind of every player. From the days of *Donkey Kong* and *Super Mario Bros* to the industry-usurping Wii, it's a career with two constants: originality and quality. Fresh from receiving his latest lifetime achievement award, the general manager of Nintendo's EAD division tells us about his road thus far – and what's next.

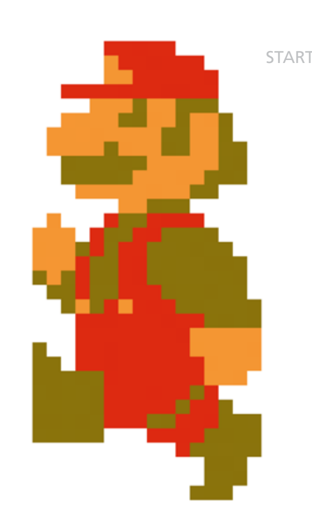
Let's go back to the beginning, when you were working under Hiroshi Yamauchi. His game selection process is the stuff of legend – did you have any ideas rejected?
I do not have any recollection of any of my proposals being turned down by Mr Yamauchi. And I think I was allowed a great deal of autonomy when it came to the next game we would make – except sometimes Mr Yamauchi approached me and said: "Isn't this the time when we need to have the next *Mario* game?" [Laughs] The way he selected games was just like this: we had some new ideas, I approach him and share them with him and say: "I think people might be entertained in a new way". And when Mr Yamauchi could really relate to that and agree, immediately it became the company's shared project. So we could immediately begin development.

Sometimes he couldn't give me an immediate 'yes'. In such situations, I secretly proceeded ahead with a project and at the time when it was forming into a more concrete thing, I tentatively approached Mr Yamauchi again, giving him the opportunity to pass everything. [Laughs] Well, after all, Mr Yamauchi is the same age as my parents, so I guess that he was maybe looking at me as a son or grandson doing something for him. I think he had a little of that kind of approach. But, having said that, of course the end result is sometimes very upsetting because there are business realities, too. My game could sell lower than Nintendo or Mr Yamauchi expected – then he became really, really upset. Furious, in fact.

During his time as president he had a great gut feeling about what kind of ventures would work, and what kind would not sell. If Mr Yamauchi said, "This could turn out OK," thinking it was a prototype when in reality it was nearly complete, he'd then say, "OK, this is going to be a good title in the marketplace." This is not common. There are often times when other managers in the industry could not have had that kind of clear foresight. Even within Nintendo, other managers often tended to disagree about my prospects whenever I was showing the same piece of software to them. But, out of everyone, Mr Yamauchi tended to have the most precise forecasts as to how much a certain piece of software could sell.

I'll give you a couple of examples. With *Donkey Kong*, I demonstrated how the game would basically work and he liked it, and he immediately demanded that I should stop any other work right now, and concentrate upon finishing this particular project. And when I first showed him the demo of *Super Mario Bros*, he really, really liked it. I still recall him saying: "This is great – you





Pitching *Super Mario Bros* and *Donkey Kong* to then Nintendo president Hiroshi Yamauchi resulted in immediate approval. The games' successes tell their own story

can travel on land and in the sky and even in the water. This is going to be amazing."

This might surprise you, but I have never provided Mr Yamauchi with any presentation sheets at all. Often, at the first stage I simply provided him with some short memos, or a picture showing how the game idea would be constructed, or with a presentation. And then, once Mr Yamauchi understands that main image, I'd try to expand and explain the idea with him in more detail. And that was the point at which he could use his own instincts to tell if it was going to be great.

Your first supervisor as a game designer was Gumpei Yokoi. What did you learn from him?
According to Nintendo's own system, our internal organisation, I have never directly reported to Mr Yokoi! It's rather that I was always trying to seek out how he made games, perhaps indirectly. I was able to take his advice when I was working on *Donkey Kong* and, with other projects, I was able to have the opportunity to stay close to him, even though we were working on different things.

"When I first showed Mr Yamauchi the demo of Super Mario Bros, he really liked it. I recall him saying: 'You can travel on land and in the sky and even in water. This is going to be amazing'"

I was able to see how he tackled certain other areas of software. For example, I still recall that whenever we were together in the same meeting, he used to share certain opinions that came from different perspectives that I could never imagine at the time. He would also just gaze at games in development at Nintendo and then would suddenly pinpoint certain areas – the ones he believed were the most important areas to be worked on in that particular project. I then saw how he would try to persuade his subordinates of the importance of that particular area. I think that I learned a great many lessons from how I observed Mr Yokoi training his subordinates, and I think in my position I use some of them.

Coming up to date, how many lifetime achievements does this Bafta award make?
Well, it depends on what awards you'd define as 'lifetime achievement' ones. If, for example, you're going to include the medal I received from the French culture and communication ministry, around four. Maybe it's five.

Does it feel odd winning these things when you're not really near the end of your career?
Ah, sometimes. I attend awards ceremonies like these and I notice that everyone in front of me is much younger than I am. So I do find myself thinking, 'I really deserve this now!' [Laughs]

At what point did you notice the age difference?
Well, it was just a couple of years ago at one of these ceremonies. It wasn't just the people in front of me who were much younger than I was, it was also the people judging the awards! [Laughs]

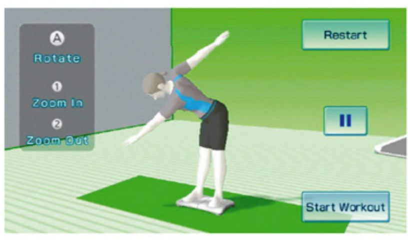
Talking of age, would it be fair to say that your recent work is generally software that tries to transcend such issues?
Actually, I've never thought that way at all. In recent years what you can do by taking advantage of videogame technology has expanded. And I've also become more interested in the people surrounding me, and what sort of subjects they might be interested in. In my thinking I'm inclined to learn more about that. It's not the case that I was intentionally trying to expand the boundaries of whatever videogames can do: rather, I was simply trying to expand whatever I could do to more people. Also, that feeling that other people might be appreciative happened to be something that personally interested me!

Before the launch of the Wii hardware, we at Nintendo had already come up with the idea that Wii is the machine that's going to be hooked up with the television set in the living room of the household. And so then the family members become the basis for us to think about how we'd like to develop the hardware and software for Wii. And that is why I have made software like *Wii Music*, *Wii Sports*, *Wii Fit* and other assorted titles. These are all based upon what kind of image we'd like people to have of us, and thinking about the people surrounding the Wii hardware. Having said that, however, I've never lost my passion for making the games which are enjoyed by the more traditional gamer. An example is the recent introduction of *Super Mario Galaxy 2*.

So, in terms of families, when you're thinking about a new game do you now think about a single player, or many players?
Once again it depends upon the image of the software. In the case of *New Super Mario Bros Wii*, I was able to imagine how one person or multiple people would be playing in that game. For the fourplayer mode, I had a different impression from how we had conceived *Super Smash Bros* being played by four players. So it's not as simple as having a singleplayer image versus a multiplayer image, but whenever I have the opportunity I've been saying to our developers that multiplayer is now expected with most games. And we must not shy away from the challenge ourselves: that challenge being whether or not we are going to provide players with a multiplayer-focused game that has the tools for them to greatly enjoy it, or whether you are going to be able to make a good enough singleplayer mode that can naturally be enjoyed in a multiplayer way. After all that, I turn to the developers: we should not hide the multiplayer mode, or try to escape from a challenge everyone has trouble with.

Online multiplayer is an area in which Nintendo's taken small steps – do you feel the company has a firm strategy in this area?
To be honest, I think it's rather unfair whenever





Wii Music (top left) may not have been as big a success as Wii Fit and Wii Sports, but Miyamoto says that it's given him lots of ideas to work with in the future

I hear such comments – that Nintendo isn't proactive when it comes to its online strategy. The fact of the matter is that we always want all Wii consoles to be connected online, all the time, so Nintendo has never been less than proactive in that kind of endeavour.

It is true, though, that Nintendo hasn't been very proactive in developing such online activities as an MMOG. But when it comes to our endeavours that try to take advantage of internet technology, where we can provide our customers with more fun and entertainment, then I think we can say we have been very, very proactive and well-received. And that attitude won't be changed at all in the future. But probably the other thing that we are desperate to realise is the core business structure. Do we need to demand customers pay monthly fees to enjoy online activities? Or give an online subscription that is free of charge, but then offer something extra for people that pay, so that they get some extra value? With these core business strategies I think we are less active than we should be.

Your competitors are almost ready to introduce new motion-control interfaces, which will make the Wii hardware feel less distinctive. During the PlayStation era, Sony followed your lead by using analogue sticks with its DualShock pad, and then its hardware became a kind of standard. Do you see any parallels between the two time periods?

Nintendo has been in the videogame business for more than 30 years. And, for that matter, when it comes to the entertainment business, ever since the company was founded more than 100 years ago, entertainment has been Nintendo's commodity – always – and in that we have a particularly strong pride. Nintendo always tries to make something that other people have never made before. So, because of that, other people might want to copy us in the end. Whenever something we have created and presented is followed by copies, we always feel it is threatening. More than that, we're concerned that others are trying to do something similar for the sake of it. It's not encouraging to Nintendo. But there is one more important thing: we try to make something unprecedented every time. And we try to make it so that it can become the standard in our entertainment business one day.

"For many years now, at any one point I have been in charge of 500 to 1,000 people, but quite a few of them have been working with me for nearly 30 years"

For a while now, Sony has directly funded a larger number of game developers across the world than Nintendo. Does the fact that your workforce is smaller encourage Nintendo to be more driven by ideas?

It's not just about the sheer size of the business, or more people working on something. For example, I am the head of the Entertainment Analysis and Development [EAD] division at Nintendo, and we are gradually increasing the number of people working in this division. Having said that, one person can teach enough important things to only a limited number of people simultaneously. So it's not just a matter of economics. We can't simply increase the number of employees without limit to catch up with need or deal with increasing demand from the market. What we have been trying to do, without simply increasing the number of employees, is work on the big titles together with a number of other associated titles as well. I think by now we're able to power up with some of the knowhow and experience within ourselves.

Having said that, you've referenced the number of people working for the company, and are talking about the developers only at Nintendo, but the fact of the matter is that there are many people outside of the company who are closely working and collaborating with Nintendo, so the total number of people working solely on the production of software at Nintendo is really big.

One particular difference I should point out with Nintendo is that I am in charge of the EAD division and very few people have ever left that division. Very few people have ever left Nintendo at all, actually. Nintendo is unique in this respect. Many people job-shift between different development and publishing companies. For many years now, at any one point I have been in charge of 500 to 1,000 people, but quite a few of them have been working with me for nearly 30 years. And it's not uncommon at all for people stay at Nintendo for ten years or 20 years, and yet they are still looked upon as the young developers in the company! Nintendo is an unusual company, I guess.

How do you feel about the wider gaming landscape – the spectacle-driven games, as well as the explosion of Flash gaming and niche titles?

I think I should share with you my own approach on how to make games. I first come up with some sort of theory, outlining unusual game functionality that people might enjoy. And as soon as I think of that sort of idea, I want that idea to be in the



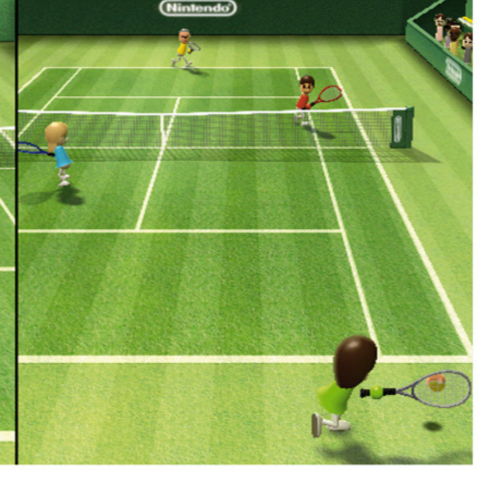
The influential N64 joypad is just one example of a company focused on what Miyamoto calls "unprecedented" initiatives



Miyamoto on…

Streamlining *Super Mario Galaxy 2*

"In the case of *Super Mario Galaxy 2*, our primary objective is providing the player with the maximum playtime possible. Because of that, we have intentionally minimised the opening demonstration, the player explanation sequence, and actually there are fewer movies incorporated in general. Once again we are making the best of how a player can enjoy their own playstyle with *Mario Galaxy 2*. This all depends on what kind of objective you have in the first place. At the beginning of any development for games like these, we really want to eliminate any areas other than the ones which can encourage players to enjoy themselves with play. As well as eliminating a lot of the movie sequences, I've also looked carefully at the 'combo' system. This is a basic thing in an action game. Sometimes there are games in which you really enjoy the special combos, and a lot of the emphasis is on how to execute more diverse or different combos. But for this mode, we really want people to enjoy the basic action."



hands of the customers as soon as possible. So then I think, 'OK, to realise this, is it really necessary for us to have the title or an introductory movie screen at all? Do we really need to incorporate a story that's going to take up programming time?' With this in mind, we can decide on the actual deadline for completion.

From that point I try to take the minimum number of steps because, as I say, I want to provide the customer with that unusual experience as soon as possible. So, I've had some strong disagreements, in my mind at least, when people say, "We are going to make this big title for this release date", or, "We are going to make this small title", because that is not the way I personally approach making games. Actually, it's the complete opposite of how I make games.

I have never denied the beauty of big titles. Nor have I ever denied the potential of the smaller – or 'ichi' – titles at all. However, whether it's going to be a huge game or an ichi title must depend upon how you want it to be realised for the customer, to provide that experience you first thought of. You have to focus not just on the end result, but on the purpose, I guess.

The people working on so-called 'small' games are interesting in terms of software design, because there are fewer people involved in making sure that the end result will suit the tastes of its intended audience. As a creator of small games, the ability to put your own personal expression on something can be highly appreciated by the audience. When you are working on the so-called 'big' games, there is always competition with other companies. There's always a precedent.

If we're going to compete against these big titles, we need a great number of programmers and design staff and so on. In the end, what becomes most important in trying to create that game is who is going to be the co-ordinator. We have to create a whole process and decide upon the desired end result and the quality of the software. In other words, what is required is that this person has the ability as a manager, not necessarily as a game developer. So I think it's logical for me to say that if the total size of the game project is smaller, more personal expression and taste can appear. While I am not denying the qualities of big titles at all, when I am working on a so-called 'big' game, the first thing I really have to do is try to select the best people to handle the management of it.



Miyamoto's most recent accolade is his Bafta Fellowship Award. Accepting it, he talked of his desire to take on new challenges

Looking over your career, what do you think has been your greatest achievement? And what about your greatest regret?
Well, I honestly don't know! [Laughs] Probably Mario is something very important, because that character gave me a very unusual experience – of how the world is influenced when suddenly a great number of one piece of software sells around the world. And where we have been able to expand the gaming population, I see a great number of people who used to not play with videogames suddenly start playing with videogames. That was a very unusual and exciting experience, and that is still ongoing.

I've tried to forget whatever regrets I might have had. For example, as soon as we've finished a project, I always have some regrets about what we could've done or should've done. I think about this or that – other ways of doing things. But then these are great ideas that we can utilise with future projects, one way or another. Some people might say that *Wii Music* is a good example. It's been said that it could have sold much more than it actually has to date, but it simply means that I have some assets right now that, by tweaking something, we might be able to have great success with something similar in the future.

As far as this year goes, though, I'd like people to try playing *New Super Mario Bros* with four players together. And everyone waiting for *Mario Galaxy 2* should practise in oneplayer mode in *Mario Galaxy*. Ultimately I hope that everybody spends a lot of time with Mario!



Miyamoto on…

Balancing the old with the new

"I think *Super Mario Galaxy 2* is going to be one of the greatest action games when it comes to how many things you can do, and the enjoyment of the movements. This is a really action-packed game and I want many people to play it. It's true that it's rather challenging, though, especially for novice players. If they haven't played *Mario Galaxy* it might be rather difficult for them even to control Mario in the first place.

"Conversely, we've been trying to make this game so that, when it comes to play control, it's as easy as possible, and because of this I've heard there's a reduced possibility for the 3D sickness some players get from these games. So even though the difficulty is higher for the novice players, and especially for those who have not played with Mario before, if you can get rid of that first hurdle I think you'll be able to appreciate the real power of 3D action games. And that will pave the way for you to able to enjoy any other 3D action game in the future, so I hope that everybody is going to try it."

Newswire



Livingstone bags Boudica

Eidos life president and Games Workshop co-founder Ian Livingstone (above) was honoured at the inaugural British Inspiration Awards held in London on April 23. The awards, a charitable enterprise created 'to recognise those who have contributed to our country's economic, social and artistic development through creative endeavour', featured categories across a wide range of entertainment media – with Wallace & Gromit creator Nick Park and music producer Sir George Martin also walking away with Boudica-shaped gongs – and were initiated by David Yarnton, chairman of the BIA organising committee and managing director of Nintendo UK. "The UK is the creative capital of the world," Yarnton said, speaking after the ceremony. "With the same hard work, drive and determination shown by the winners and all our nominees, creative people can excel in this country."

WEBSITE OF THE MONTH

Videogame news websites are hardly a rarity, through few take such a literal approach. The First-Person Observer is the latest project from Christopher Livingstone, author of popular *Half-Life 2* webcomic Concerned. FPO's remit is 'around-the-clock coverage of breaking news from inside the games you play and love'. In practice, this means utterly straight-faced Onion-style satirical news stories on in-game happenings. One current report has a Liberty City police officer angrily blaming the city's complete lack of a judicial system on the repeated arrest and release of Niko Bellic.

Webcomics have been poking fun at videogames' contrivances for years, but FPO's real strength lies in they way it uses games to riff on real-world issues. Other front-page headlines, for example, include a full report from Washington DC on how health-pack reform is dividing the nation.



Site: The First-Person Observer
URL: www.firstpersonobserver.com



The money pitch

Get in the Game gives UK developers the chance to make a play for funding, but what lies beneath is a debate on a disconnected industry

The UK videogame industry has balancing issues. All of the money and resources are on one side of the balance and the aspirant, home-grown talent of the future is on the other, hanging by a modest thread. It's an age-old social quandary: the rich get richer and the poor stay poor. So how do you bridge the gap?

Get in the Game, a scheme developed by development agency North West Vision and Media, aims to at least alleviate some of the symptoms. More than a networking event for indie hopefuls to bask in the limelight of big bucks studios, **Enda Carey**, scheme founder and head of games at the body, hopes he can shed light on more universal problems facing the UK independent scene: "We've got this disconnect between the small guys and the big guys – previously we would have had a middle-ground for the smaller teams to pitch to, then have it wrapped up into a demo and distributed."

Having just completed its second season, GITG gives developers – regardless of experience – the opportunity to make a pitch for a £10,000 prototype fund. Once selected, five successful candidates move into an intense development cycle that sees them make a final pitch to a board of industry veterans – with the chance, but not guarantee, of being offered a contract. It's a commendable not-for-profit model, one that sees NWVM reimbursed for its funding only if a project is picked up and the money built into a subsequent deal. It's a model NWVM is familiar with – itself funded from a variety of sources and councils with an eye to generating creativity over profits.

"The ten grand is pure high-risk money – we don't intend to recoup it," Carey affirms. "The vast majority of developers just want [senior producer at Sony Computer Entertainment Europe and one of this year's GITG judges] **Phil Gaskell**'s contact details. I didn't really consider that at first, but it's about breaking down that Sony machine. Phil might get 100 phone calls but one might be a gem – that's the key."

Carey's roots lie in the days of major PlayStation IP (he was *Wipeout*'s brand manager at Studio Liverpool, the venue for the final pitching sessions), and he's noticed a sizeable shift in the market without an equivalent change in the business model. "With PSN and PS3 as platforms," he says, "it was obvious that Sony was chasing the big-ticket developers – 150-plus people, £10 million projects – and when it came to smaller developers they were really struggling to find a lot of them – five-man bands, ten-man bands.



This year's workshops were at Liverpool's FACT centre, a site strengthening its bond with the game industry through events like the recent exhibition Space Invaders: Art and the Computer Game Environment







GET IN THE GAME

Gaskell (below) now handles the *Buzz!* franchise for Sony and has a firm knowledge of what makes and breaks a project as it's hurled at the blank canvas of a pitching session. Subsequent to GITG, North West production studio Milky Tea is now in talks with Sony regarding its 24-meets-Bourne realtime strategy title (right), set in the world of counter-terrorism



"So we talked to them about what the problem was, why they weren't teaming with the companies in the north west. And they said they didn't know any of them, so that was easy – let's get them together."

The inadequate marketing skills of smaller companies eyeing a move into games is a hole that education hasn't managed to plug. "There are very few courses on the business of games," says Carey. "It's a massive problem for a small developer because now you can self-publish – everyone thinks they can throw their IP on to PSN and just wait. And they don't sell because they haven't got the marketing machine. They forget about the basics. If you went through a Sony green-light process the first question would be: 'Is there a space in the market?'"

Among the hopefuls there's a cautious optimism towards the doors being blown off the money-men's hideout, and a varying degree of ambition for looting it. Design agency Grant Midwinter has one of the more subversive proposals, taking trash TV and YouTube voting as its basis, and its creative director **Derrick Grant** is aware of the pitfalls facing such a project: "There are so many clones out there that new ideas are a big risk."

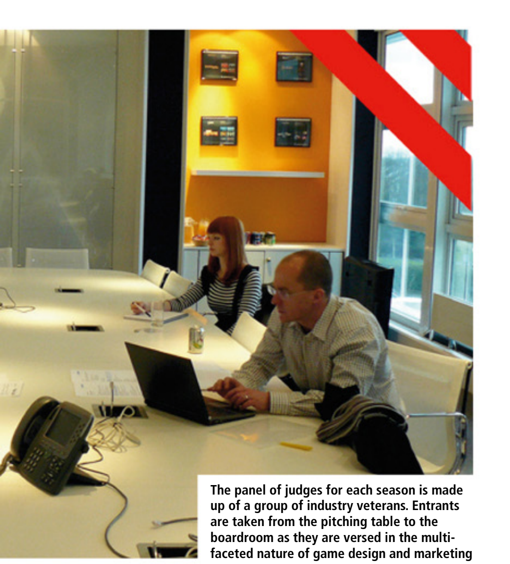
Claire Rogers of developer group PixinWorks, however, has her sights set on that same movement of faux-retro clones that Grant is so wary of: "There's a new audience who want to experience old-school titles. You've seen that on PSN, with *Gravity Crash* and *Super Stardust* – people are buying them."

If anything, then, GITG at least showcases extremes – but at the end of its day of pitching, what remains is still the practical question: just how do you get The Man to open his cheque book? That Man, Gaskell, makes no qualms about what's required for that prize-winning pitch: "Do your homework. Understand the catalogue of the publisher you are pitching to, and pitch into the gaps. Don't come to us with an idea for a quiz game with buzzers, or the most realistic driving simulator, for example. Come up with a clear 'X' that will quickly and easily communicate your idea, and that will make it compelling. Know the competition, and be clear about what makes your idea better, or what differentiates it."

And while workshops, pitching sessions and education programs are all well and good, they clearly only go so far with the decision-makers. "People buy people, and if I see that you're passionate about your idea, then I know you will put every ounce of effort into it, and it should get signed," Gaskell continues. "In the digital age of Facebook, Twitter and networking, to put it another way, don't underestimate the power of the human touch."

"Do your homework. Understand the catalogue of the publisher you are pitching to, and pitch into the gaps. Don't come to us with an idea for a quiz game with buzzers"





The panel of judges for each season is made up of a group of industry veterans. Entrants are taken from the pitching table to the boardroom as they are versed in the multi-faceted nature of game design and marketing



Bridging the gap

How GITG is looking beyond indie devs

Carey (above) has a past with big-brand, big-money projects that puts him in a good position to call the north west of England to arms as he attempts to build a bridge between indies and studios. Though the reception to the scheme has been positive, it's by no means a permanent solution and Carey himself is realistic about stretching the scheme too far, hinting, perhaps, at a leap for GITG itself into the world of the studios: "We may not do the scheme again here; we've exhausted all the devs. We've had about ten non-games developers come through now. It's going to be interesting what we do next. We've always worked with the external dev teams; maybe we'll work with the internal dev teams."



DOO DOO, DOO DI DI DOO DOO!

There's something insidious about the way videogame music creeps into players' minds. You don't really notice you've heard the same two-minute track the best part of a thousand times until you find yourself humming the Mute City theme from *F-Zero* on the way to work more than a decade later. Still, that vast store of half-remembered tunes can finally be put to good work in achieving as high a score as possible in John Freeman's Sampla. Sampla is a multiple-choice music quiz which plays MIDI versions of a selection of classic tunes, awarding bonuses for players who guess the game they're sampled from quickly. No prizes for getting *Zelda*, but let's see if you can tell *Altered Beast* and *Golden Axe* apart.

tinyurl.com/johnfree



"New *Sam & Max* PS3 Gameplay Footage Features Teleportation, Angry Scotsman."
Telltale's USPs seem to just get better and better

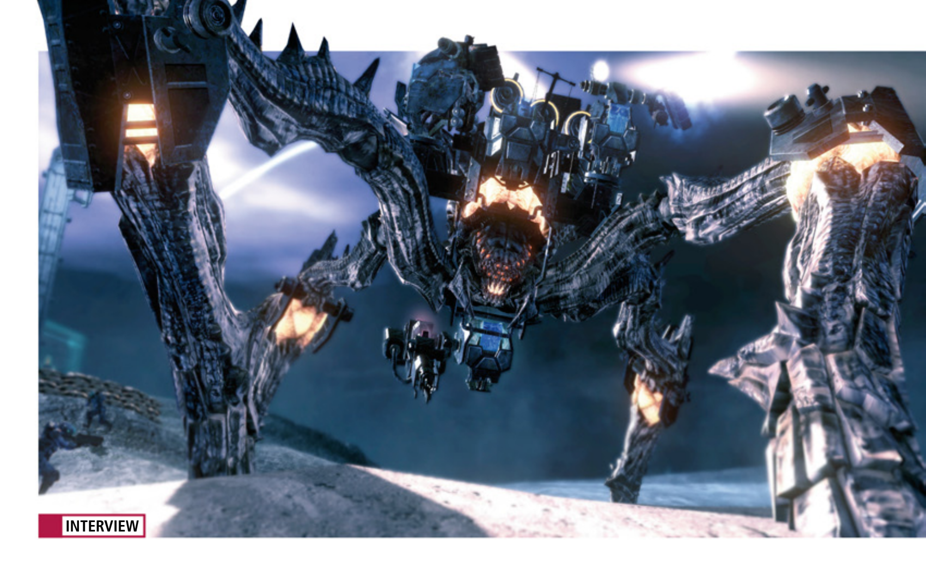
"When I started working there two years ago, my goal was to make *DeathSpank* the most awesome game ever made and have it win a Nobel Prize and the early word out of Stockholm is that *DeathSpank* is neck-in-neck with some string theory dweeb (eleven dimensions my ass)."
Ron Gilbert gazes into some kind of awesome crystal ball as he departs from Hothead Games

"THQ brings M. Night Shyamalan's The Last Airbender to life as an interactive video game that immerses players into the world of bending."
Yes, at our ages, we know we shouldn't still smirk at things like this from **THQ**. (Incidentally, we don't want to see the non-interactive video game)

"Should normal diplomacy or military might fail to resolve conflicts between empires, Extreme Diplomacy would allow two world leaders to enter a death match and fight to the finish, using special attacks and finishing moves. Two world leaders enter; one world leader leaves. The victor will obtain complete control of the challenger's world empire."
2K Games and its *Civilization 5* Extreme Diplomacy mode April Fool. We particularly liked George Washington's 'Uncle Slam' attack

"This really redefines the perception of what a freebie is. No longer will a freebie mean just some cheapy web game."
Sumo Digital's creative evangelist **Sean Millard** on the upcoming Dr Who game. If he wants decent freebies, he should spend some time in the **Edge** office

"Iconic moves of Iron Man are recreated in the game including the one when he breaks the ground."
Gameloft's mobile iteration of *Iron Man 2* pulls out all the stops



INTERVIEW

Just the four of us

Lost Planet 2's marquee feature is fourplayer co-op. Producer Jun Takeuchi explains the joy of quad damage

A pioneer in Capcom's charge towards the west, **Jun Takeuchi** has been involved in some of the studio's most popular, and controversial, titles. Having straddled the gap between film and game with *Onimusha 3*, and dabbled with a buddy system in *Resident Evil 5*, his latest production pushes the developer's boat even farther out to western seas.

What lessons were learned from the production of the original *Lost Planet*?
There were many – the most important was the control system: we had criticisms from the audience that it was too complex but we have simplified it now. Aiming in general was a concern, and the lack of a dash or run. This has been remedied and it should make a big difference.

"Living in Japan and making games for a global market – Capcom are the lucky ones. The other Japanese publishers are still struggling to appeal to the west"

Were those complaints from Japan?
No, from the west.

You've previously commented that the Japanese videogame industry is too insular; that it only produces games for its own audience – has that changed?
As far as I'm concerned right now, it is the same. Living in Japan and making games for a global market – we [Capcom] are the lucky ones. The other Japanese publishers are still struggling to find out how to appeal to the western market.

Do you think the Japanese industry therefore needs a dramatic shift to survive?
I've actually been seeing some developers and



***Lost Planet 2* is mech-heavy and, in multiplayer, reaches delirious levels of chaos. Confusing as it may be at times, there's never a quiet moment**







The character designs of *Lost Planet 2* are striking, and each episode provides a new style, from the metallic dreadlocks of jungle pirates to industrial neon warriors (left)



Jun Takeuchi has been instrumental in the evolution of some of Capcom's most popular franchises, having been active in productions as early as the SNES version of *Street Fighter II*



publishers shifting to new types of organisational structure. So we should see some form of change in the near future. First of all, however, the Japanese market has to accept western games. *Call Of Duty* had good sales in Japan so, gradually, maybe it is changing.

***Metroid* creator Yoshio Sakamoto recently talked about the influence of film on his work – how has it influenced your own games?**
I enjoy the film medium, but I wasn't ever inspired by it visually. More by how they are created and produced, and the concept behind them, how they work behind the scenes. That's what I learned from my time on *Onimusha 3*, and I've been applying it ever since.

Do you see similarities in how films and games are produced nowadays?
In as much as they are entertainment business models, yes, but they are different mediums – a movie is there to entertain people with visuals and sound, whereas a game is about interactivity and communicating with users. I learned a lot about cinematics, but the gameplay is something else entirely – that is a discipline learned separately.

With *Resident Evil 5* you introduced a co-operative element to a series rooted in a sense of singleplayer isolation. What is it about singleplayer titles that inspires you to open them up to a community-based method of play?
When you design a singleplayer game, you must consider the placement of enemies, scripting of AIs, the locations and then the placement of the player. When you think about it, it's quite restrictive. You're playing in a world with prescribed stories behind it. However, if you introduce another human being to that universe, something else happens. You get surprises from other players and their reactions. I experimented with the buddy system in *Resident Evil 5* and now in *Lost Planet 2* we've increased it to four. It may still be a prescribed universe, but there are more variables provided by your buddies. It's less predictable.

Do you have any intention of taking other IP, like *Dead Rising* for example, and opening them up to this human variable?
Sort of like *Smash Bros*? Yes, that's a very interesting idea. We had a very similar trial with *Marvel Vs Capcom 2*, so why not?

Where do you plan on going next – will you continue to increase player numbers or go back to a focus on storytelling in your next project?
I've always been interested in the storytelling, the drama of a game. If I have the opportunity of creating a new game, I'd be inspired by something like *Heavy Rain*. Telling a story in a brand-new way.

Have Capcom's less successful titles, such as *Dark Void* or *Bionic Commando*, affected the production process of *Lost Planet 2*?
[Laughs] Not much. But if you attend a green-light meeting the pressure from senior management is a little bit higher now.

EVENT

Ankama chameleon

The creator of MMOGs Dofus and Wakfu welcomes 25,000 attendees to its annual event



A quick scan pegged the average age of the crowd at about 12. *Dofus* sits happily at number one among this age bracket in Europe, but reaches a wide demographic. The simplicity of its client means that players can get involved at school

Floating on the edge of Paris' 15th Arondissement, the Porte de Versailles possesses little of a typical convention centre's visual impact. Tucked tastefully behind bleached turnstile gates and fringed with trees, the size of the halls within is tough to fathom from the street. For an English-speaking audience, the reason Hall Five is currently filled with more than 25,000 people is similarly difficult to work out.

But ask anyone inside the cavernous centre why they've made the trip three miles south-west of Paris' core, and you'll know – this is a sprawling community's vibrant heart. This is Ankama Convention 5, the French game developer's second Paris-based event since outgrowing its Lille housings, and it is not struggling for attendees.

With a registered player population of 30 million, the bustle is to be expected. Knowledge of Ankama's properties – beginning with hyper-popular isometric MMOG *Dofus* – is to be assumed among the majority of France's tech-literate youth. Telling a tale of magic, combat, and dragon eggs, and dressed in beautifully coloured gallic anime garb, *Dofus* is a phenomenon in French-speaking territories. "It just took off in early 2008," reports **Cedric Gerard**, our guide to Ankama's world and the convention itself. *Dofus* sits happily at the number one slot for multiplayer games in France, Belgium and Switzerland, extending its reach across oceans, to Canada and Morocco. Its total reach is 3.5 million people, paying five euros per month to play the game; 250,000 are online at any one time.

Telling a tale of magic, combat, and dragon eggs, and dressed in beautifully coloured gallic anime garb, Dofus is a phenomenon in French-speaking territories

Despite a sizeable player population in South America and Spain, *Dofus* – like Ankama itself – is a peculiarly French success story. Sixty per cent of the game's players are based in France and, thus far, the studio's founders have been content to exist in a happy niche, targeting players perhaps too young or technologically unequipped for more demanding, 3D MMOG experiences. It's not set to stay this way for long. This fifth Ankama convention is a clarion call to English-speaking lands, with the release of a new MMOG – *Wakfu* – and other spinoff games intending to push the franchises as far as Japan. Gerard explains the shift in focus: "*Dofus* relied on humour that didn't necessarily translate: a joke about a French pop star doesn't work in England. *Wakfu* avoids that problem."

Wakfu is aimed worldwide, shedding the tight cultural appendages that restricted *Dofus* from global appeal. The game – still in closed beta – is hidden in plain sight on the show floor, a temporary cubicle erected around 50 PCs, each playing and replaying a short tutorial section. Access to this makeshift room is tightly controlled, a throng of Ankama-shirted staff blocking access to excitable youths. Gerard grins as he points out his friends: "That's our legal manager – he's been drafted in today." There's a distinct sense of family, and knowledge of *Dofus* and *Wakfu*'s backstory runs deep, from game directors to the youngest of the convention's attendees. This is compounded by the presence of a multitude of parents – many stand over their child as they play, while others engage, pointing, conversing, enjoying the game with their offspring. When an entire family – from middle-aged father down to small child – traipses into the centre in full cosplay getup, it proves Ankama's chops as a developer of games deep enough for mixed generations to enjoy.

Another game rounds out the current *Wakfu* roster: *Islands Of Wakfu* is set to be released on Xbox Live Arcade as a 2D button-stabber that tells more of the gameworld's backstory. It's a major push, imbuing the existing world of *Dofus* with an attitude more palatable to those outside France, and surrounding the game is a galaxy of ephemera: toys, magazines, comics and two seasons of high-grade animation produced by France's national television broadcaster. Whether it'll find success with an audience weaned on anything from *World Of Warcraft* to *Farmville* remains to be seen. But there's no doubting the implication of Ankama's strategy: these days, the mountain must come to Muhammad.





Ankama's videogame wing was solidly supported by the company's other arms. The trading card game's European tournament and animation booths drew sizable crowds



Dofus is a social game, and one often played by parents with their children. Many attendees explained that, rather than simply observing, they get involved in the game with their kids

Continue

The Chief
Not in *Reach*, but he'll be back… one day

The plumber
And his little green dino chum, naturally

The Sackboy
A welcome return for gaming's biggest grin

Quit

Eyjafjallajökull havoc
Our worst day at an airport since No Russian

Dev/pub fallouts
Let's be honest, it's not a good look for anyone

RROD… again
Two on the same day? It's our new record

INCOMING

Marvel Vs Capcom 3: Fate Of Two Worlds

FORMAT: **360, PS3** PUBLISHER: **CAPCOM**



A new and unexpected age of heroes, which like *Street Fighter IV* uses Capcom's mighty MT Framework engine. Further similarities include greater accessibility while retaining the expected depth

Bionic Commando Rearmed 2

FORMAT: **360, PS3** PUBLISHER: **CAPCOM**



New physics-based puzzles, enhanced visuals and camera, better co-op and an all-new, NES-flavoured musical score mean it's still the king of the swingers. Cutscenes by art studio Massive Black

Okamiden

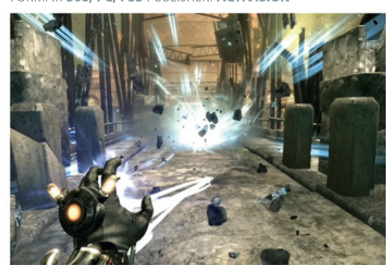
FORMAT: **DS** PUBLISHER: **CAPCOM**



The camera never shies from the series' rich palette, the stylus brush controls are inevitably natural, and Kuni, the young rider of hero pup Chibiterasu, adds a whole new dimension of AI co-op

Singularity

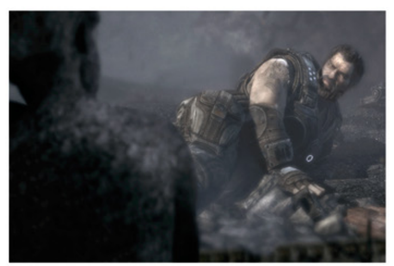
FORMAT: **360, PC, PS3** PUBLISHER: **ACTIVISION**



New trailer The Last Resort threatens a double entendre, Raven's shooter now months overdue and trying that little bit harder to not resemble *BioShock*. It's hard to see what's changed, though

Gears Of War 3

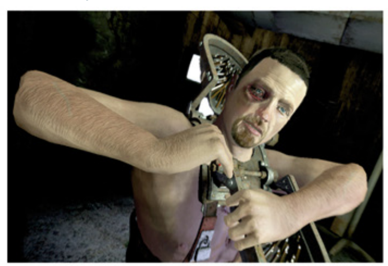
FORMAT: **360** PUBLISHER: **MICROSOFT**



After yet another accidental Xbox Live leak, the trailer hints at dark times during the twilight of the Locust war. The good news: fourplayer co-op and – could it be? – a female player character

Saw 2

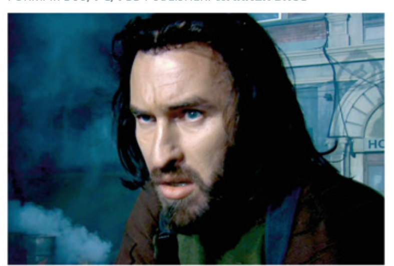
FORMAT: **360, PS3** PUBLISHER: **KONAMI**



Or should that be 'Seen'? Those textures, environments and torture traps look familiar, though there was untapped potential last time. Expect Achievements for successfully pressing buttons

FEAR 3

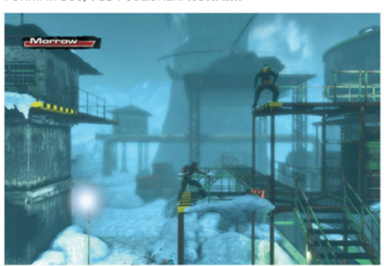
FORMAT: **360, PC, PS3** PUBLISHER: **WARNER BROS**



Do they sleep? Maybe they code in bullet-time. Nope, they've just roped in Day 1 Studios, maker of the first game's rather duff ports, to bring back Paxton Fettel for some long-awaited co-op

Rush'n Attack Ex-Patriot

FORMAT: **360, PS3** PUBLISHER: **KONAMI**



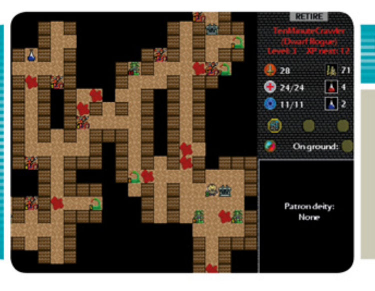
As well as potentially the greatest oxymoron of all time, "all new stealth combat" adds a modern twist to the returning Cold War coin-op. Another: non-linear levels powered by Unreal Engine 3

The Witcher 2: Assassins Of Kings

FORMAT: **360, PC, PS3** PUBLISHER: **TBA**



Officially announced after September's trailer leak, the sequel to CD Projekt's brutal slow burner is ready to spill its guts. An all-new engine means that all the screenshots are 'real'



INTERNET GAME OF THE MONTH

Desktop Dungeons

tinyurl.com/deskdun

A bite-sized *Rogue*-like, *Desktop Dungeons* eschews open-ended adventuring for self-contained ten-minute challenges. Each dungeon is enclosed within a single screen, and the player's goal is to level up to defeat all the enemies in it. But the resources with which to do this are scant. The level itself is the most precious resource of all – every square you explore restores mana and health, meaning that over-exploring a level can cripple you later in the game. Killing the boss monster becomes a strategy puzzle in which you have to harvest the maximum XP from each preceding encounter while hoarding useful items for later.

This is further complicated by spell pick-ups that can be stored or converted into an immediate bonus. Having beaten a dungeon, it gets considerably harder upon return, with even more variables. But despite its bitesize breakdown of the *Rogue*-like, the game has some persistence in the way you unlock new dungeons and characters. Fail, and you can always retire, carrying your wealth over to your next lunch break.

FROM THE PRODUCER OF "PIRATES OF THE CARIBBEAN"

JAKE GYLLENHAAL DISNEY AND JERRY BRUCKHEIMER FILMS PRESENT A MIKE NEWELL FILM

PRINCE OF PERSIA
THE SANDS OF TIME

12A

IN CINEMAS MAY 21

www.disneymovies.co.uk/princeofpersia

EXPERIENCE IT IN IMAX®

See More. Hear More. Feel More.

Prince of Persia: The Sands of Time (12A)
in IMAX® at selected ODEON cinemas
from May 21st.











Industry FOCUS

In association with Screen Digest

The rise and rise of subscription MMOGs

Piers Harding-Rolls examines the trends in pay-to-play online gaming



Having just finished the exhaustive process of finalising our 2009 data for the North American and European MMOG subscription sectors by sifting through around 130 titles/services active in the market, now seems an appropriate time to touch on some of the trends we are seeing in the market. First, it's well worth confirming that the market is still growing. Even with the increasing use of microtransactions in the west and the poor economic climate during 2009, consumers are spending more on subscription MMOGs than ever before.

As it turns out, growth in Europe was markedly stronger than in North America – in fact our quarterly tracking suggests there was a small contraction in subscriber numbers in North America in the second half of the year, but due to growth in the first half subscriber numbers were overall up at the end of the year. In contrast, Europe increased its subscribers by almost 20 per cent, driven by the activity of local operators especially on the continent and by the emergence of markets outside of western Europe. Again, this performance reaffirms our view that subscription business models remain a legitimate approach for many MMOGs and that microtransactions will coincide with subscription business models in western markets rather than replacing subscriptions in totality as they have done in much of Asia.

So, in terms of content, where has the growth been coming from? During the last 18 months there has been a deluge of social MMOGs and virtual worlds targeted at teenagers and younger. Quite a few of the pre-teen services are copycats of earlier successful examples such as *Club Penguin* and are mainly differentiated by the world's setting (for example, dinosaurs instead of penguins). There have also been a handful of these services that offer an educational slant, in an attempt to legitimise them

It's well worth confirming that the market is still growing. Even with the poor economic climate during 2009, consumers are spending more on subscription MMOGs than ever before



Warhammer Online **has closed servers and consolidated user populations since it began in 2008. After launch it boasted 800,000 registered users**





www.screendigest.com





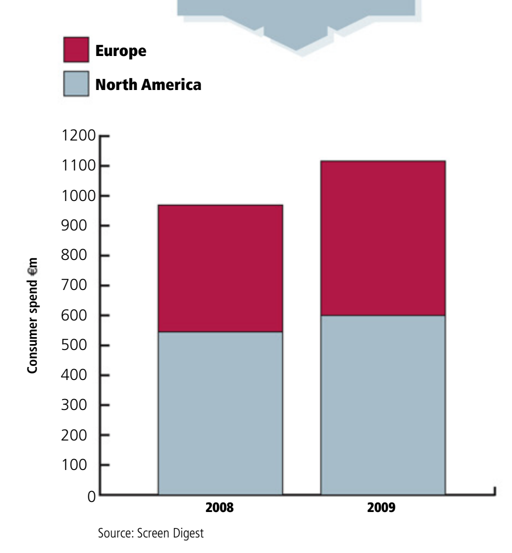
Age Of Conan (above) has seen its population fall since the highs of its launch in 2008, and shows no sign of catching *WOW* (main)

in the eyes of the parents who have to pay. Educational virtual worlds are less successful, but games with educational elements appear to be attractive to both gamers and their parents.

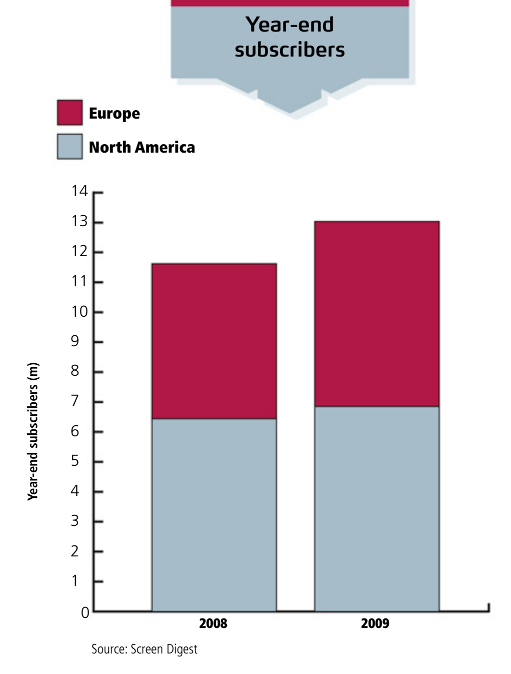
At the other end of the spectrum, the high-end fantasy RPG sector has still yet to come to terms with *WOW*'s dominance. Both *Warhammer Online* and *Age Of Conan*, direct challengers to *WOW*, have failed to make a significant impression during 2009, following bright launches in 2008. *Aion* has had a strong start and – although not directly comparable to the more western fantasy RPG – suggests there is pent-up demand for different experiences in the fantasy sector.

As many of these kids' services use premium or budget subscriptions with a free-to-play mechanic, while subscriber numbers have grown average subscription value has taken a nosedive during the year. This has had a knock-on effect on our forecasts as we believe that quite a lot of future growth is likely to come from cheaper subscription games – as a result the potential of the market has needed to be written down to reflect this new reality.

Last year we predicted that consoles would play a more significant role in the MMOG sector in 2009. As it is, no new services have materialised in the west, a reflection of the difficulties platform holders and publishers have had agreeing on a suitable business arrangement that works for both parties. These difficulties suggest that we may have to wait until 2011 before console-based MMOGs make a significant contribution to the sector as a whole. With the reality that PC-based MMOGs are targeting kids as young as five and six with their services, hardware manufacturers are increasingly witnessing their future consumers being tied into games experiences away from their platforms. This is likely to have a negative impact on the longer-term success of console platforms but could be lessened with the support of more MMOGs and social virtual world experiences.



Source: Screen Digest



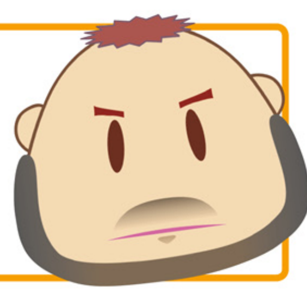
Source: Screen Digest

SOMETHING ABOUT

Japan

The girl issue

Brick Bardo sees entertainment versus the state in Tokyo's latest bout of censorship warfare



The term 'hijitsuzai seishonen' has emerged here in Japan lately. I personally had never heard of it, and the meaning is confusing, reading something along the lines of 'the juvenile who does not exist'.

What is this all about? Well, this is about characters in animation, manga and games who are under 18 years old, and this term has come out of Tokyo's federal legislation. As of right now, in the federal province of Tokyo, it is going to be illegal to depict characters that look under-age in an obscene manner, should it be in a manga or animation.

I've already brought up similar issues in the past (to be honest, I'd prefer to write about more joyful topics, but such is the life of a journalist). In recent years in Japan, heavier controls have been imposed on manga, animation, movies and games, and it has really limited what you can and can't do in these media.

I can perfectly understand the desire and need to impose a strict control on pornography and obscenity when it comes to juveniles. We are talking about real people who are actually harmed. But how can we judge obscene depictions of imaginary juveniles who are clearly not of this world – whether in manga, animation or another medium – in the same way? These are not real people or victims. I don't mean to say that weird, dark feelings should be let loose just because it isn't real, but shouldn't our own personal censorship guide us through this very human issue?

Right now, censors in Tokyo want to strictly control the depiction and possession of such images. Creators and fans will both be affected by this proposed law. The logic goes like this: even if it is in the world of animation, creators and viewers of child pornography are despicable and should be heavily policed. Which is entirely sensible, but this law is not all about porn.

In fact, this law is about an incredibly wide range of issues which affects much besides this one area of popular culture. And, as gamers and pop culture fans, we should be concerned.

Substitute into the law's focus something that's not porn, such as the sequence where you slightly see Bulma's breasts in Toriyama Akira's Dragon Ball. In games, *Dead Or Alive* – illustrated on these pages – would be a sure target, but so would *Dragon Quest*'s PafuPafu character. It is not only about hentai animation or eroge (erotic games): it's about games and entertainment in general, and our freedom to engage with it.

In recent years in Japan, heavier controls have been imposed on manga, animation, movies and games that have really limited what you can do in those media. Shouldn't our own personal censorship guide us through this issue?

It's been argued that there won't be an arbitrary use of this law. If it is clear that an adult is pretending to be a juvenile, no action will be taken. But it means very little in media painted in black, white and grey. How can you really identify if it is an adult playing the part of a juvenile in a black-and-white manga? I have a hard time believing there would be no prosecution against someone who looked under-age, as long as he/she/it says: "I'm 20!"

Interestingly, because novels and music are classed as art, these media won't be affected.



The law is going after the otakus. The man who is pushing for this law is the current governor of the federal province of Tokyo, Shintaro Ishihara. He was a talented novelist himself, and wrote books that went against the grain. They were about young people living free, away from the bushido trends of their society. He was a sensation and became very famous. Many think that because he has written novels, it is no surprise to see that other novelists aren't being targeted by the law.

Many manga/anime artists have defied the law, and they are not all erotic artists. Of course the erotic artists are part of the protest, but big names with huge reputations have also taken up the fight in Tokyo. Names such as Tetsuya Chiba, Go Nagai (Devilman), Rumiko Takahashi (Urusei Yatsura, Ranma 1/2), Fujiko Fujio A (Doraemon), Gosho Aoyama (Yaiba, Conan), Hiroshi Ninomiya (Salaryman Kintaro), Yoshikazu Yasuhiko (Yamato, Gundam, Raideen, Combatler V, Zanbot 3) – the list goes on. Everyone in Japan knows these names. Publishers are also standing their ground and gathering lots of support from a wide range of artists; there are more than 1,000 manga/anime artists among them, but also many general illustrators and other creatives. In addition, numerous associations have also joined the protest, like the Japan PEN Club Association, JANICA (Japanese Animation Creation Association), MIAU (Movements for the Internet Active Users), The Japan Library Association – again, the list goes on. But the Tokyo authorities are undeterred and are trying to rally other big cities, finding receptive ears in Osaka and Kyoto.

I agree that we need to regulate commerce and age issues, but I can't accept that we need to regulate freedom of choice, especially when the reality is within legal bounds.

The missing link here is the way our game industry is unwilling to react or take a position. You find a few creators here who join the movement or express their concern on their personal blog or Twitter account, but the industry itself is doing nothing. Why not? How will it feel when its creative freedom is eventually amputated, and it's left without a leg to stand on?

I would really like for there to be a group of executives, right at the top, that was thinking more seriously about what is going on down here on the street – before it's too late.

No More Heroes: Heroes' Paradise

New Super Mario Bros

Mediacreate Japanese sales, April 12–18

Game/weekly sales

1. ***New Super Mario Brothers Wii*** (Nintendo, Wii): 32,108
2. ***Tomodachi Collection*** (Nintendo, DS): 20,883
3. ***Pro Yakyu Spirits 2010*** (Konami, PSP): 20,880
4. ***Pro Yakyu Spirits 2010*** (Konami, PS3): 19,104
5. ***Hokuto Musou*** (Koei, PS3): 18,866
6. ***Pokémon Ranger Hikari No Kiseki*** (Pokémon, DS): 15,961
7. ***No More Heroes: Heroes' Paradise*** (Marvelous, PS3): 15,763
8. ***No More Heroes: Heroes' Paradise*** (Marvelous, 360): 15,153
9. ***Wii Fit Plus*** (Nintendo, Wii): 14,685
10. ***Ryu Ga Gotoku 4*** (Sega, PS3): 11,094


Reliable Pathfinding Technology.
Havok AI.

Hype

The future of electronic entertainment

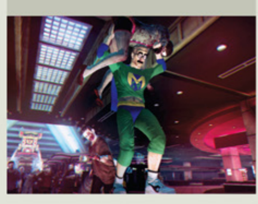
Edge's most wanted

World Of Warcraft: Cataclysm



Blizzard's reshaping of Azeroth is more exciting than the prospect of a new location. Our dilemma, of course, is whether we'll experience it as a werewolf or a goblin. Hmm.
PC, ACTIVISION BLIZZARD

Dead Rising 2



For those who can't wait to introduce a fresh batch of zombies to new and shiny kitchen products, prequel chapter *Case Zero* should be shuffling on to XBLA soon.
PC, 360, PS3, CAPCOM

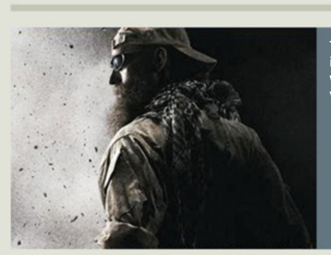
Blur



It's been too long since our trusty old LCD panel has seen lunchtime splitscreen. Come late May, the tea and baguettes will fly, and there'll be a review at edge-online.com.
360, PS3, PC, BIZARRE CREATIONS

Death Ltd

From War Of The Worlds to wars in the world



The new *Medal Of Honor* title draws on the image of a real-world mercenary to market its war cry. The blurring lines between real and virtual conflict makes for grey-area gaming

Like arms manufacturers and dealers, the game industry thrives on war. Since *Space Invaders*' popularity, our primary objectives have always included literal targets.

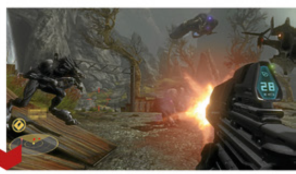
More than half of this month's previews are of titles that send you behind enemy lines to blow opponents into bloody chunks or, in the case of *Vanquish*, circuitry. For all the tabloid outrage over a *Grand Theft Auto*, no genre puts the blinkers on players like the shooter. Whether it's a thirdperson bullet-ballet or an FPS with real-world weapons, it's lock and load.

A huge part of *Halo: Reach*'s appeal is that you'll be shooting other people. They're the best opponent you could ask for: always learning, always surprising, sometimes better and sometimes worse. And, apart from the cuss words you hear at strained moments, the online killing fields are full of pleasant surprises and brothers in arms.

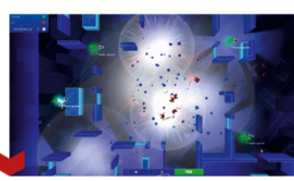
What's weirder than shooting the avatar of another human being? Try our more 'realistic' virtual wars. Titles like *Sniper: Ghost Warrior* and its inspirations (*Ghost Recon*, *Far Cry*) have made a meal out of rendering real-world conflicts as black-and-white duels between down-and-dirty rebels and the staunchly disciplined, technologically superior iron fists of the capitalist world. Try to tot up your personal bodycount over the last decade and, as well as aliens and monsters, there'll be several foreign cultures in the pile. You'll probably need a calculator.

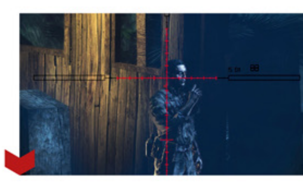
With contemporary subject matter there will always be contemporary problems, not the least of which is the question of taste. Konami's vacillating over *Six Days In Fallujah* shows that publishers aren't prepared to face difficult questions about their products, while the new trend for specifying the country of engagement and wheeling out military personnel at a *Medal Of Honor* press conference indicates one ominous way forward.

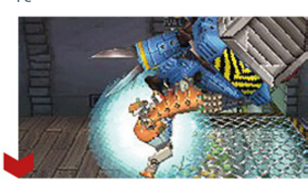
As the boundaries between war and entertainment blur, serious ethical and political questions about the medium have to be asked. Games should absolutely be provocative, but giving you a literal firstperson perspective on an ongoing conflict carries with it a responsibility – and one that no game on the horizon looks capable of bearing.











FORMAT: **360**
PUBLISHER: **MICROSOFT**
DEVELOPER: **BUNGIE**
ORIGIN: **US**
RELEASE: **AUTUMN**
PREVIOUSLY IN: **E211**

Halo: Reach

The Spartans take to the skies for Bungie's last hurrah with Halo

Of course it soars. Though you'd be excused a little trepidation: for some, *ODST*'s moody remix of *Halo 3* highlights was one step too far. To stay at the top, *Reach* has to best an FPS marketplace more hyper-competitive than any faced by its predecessors, absorbing and adapting what works for its competitors while further refining what *Halo* already does so well. No small order.

You can point to inspirations, but they're no more than that. *Tribes* may have been first with jetpacks, but these are *Halo* jetpacks: your first whoosh into the air is a joy, the temporary flight guided and tapered by intermittent boosting. Their movement's true to the low-grav physics of *Halo*, transporting you in a lazy arc that plateaus for a second or two before the descent. There'll be no cackling pros zipping around your head while unloading their assault rifles: it's a tool for movement and surprise first, direct combat second.



> Tribes may have been first with jetpacks, but these are Halo jetpacks: your first whoosh into the air is a joy, the flight guided and tapered by intermittent boosting

The other classes are a good mix of the expected and surprising, and you can easily switch while waiting to respawn. The Scout comes with the ability to sprint, which is a useful fillip when you're being shot and need a quick exit, but only lasts a few seconds. It's the most 'standard' of the new abilities, and certainly won't be replacing the jetpack for us. The Guard class is more interesting: you can make yourself invincible for a decent length of time, pulling out of it whenever you want – but it takes a second or so to trigger, and you're rooted to the spot. It's easy to imagine uses for it in team-based games, but how about this: the first time we were up against a Guard, we almost killed him before he triggered his shield. Instinctively, we tossed a grenade. It bounced off his shell, back towards us, we were dead and he got the kill. Trying the same approach ourselves proved that it was no freak occurrence.

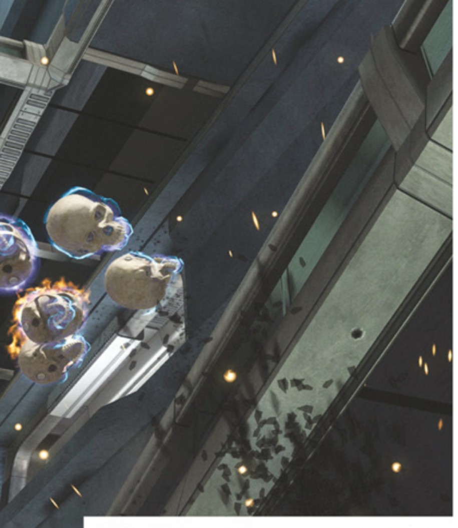
The last class, and potentially the most divisive, is the Stalker. These Spartans can trigger active camo at any point – the slower you move, the harder you are to spot – and the camping possibilities are enormous. Fact is, active camo has always been very useful, and limited, specifically because people don't move around in multiplayer at a snail's pace checking every corner, so a class created specifically for campers could prove a little offensive to those with gung-ho spirit.

On to the game itself, and Invasion's the first mode we try, a *Battlefield*-inspired turf war in which a team of Elites attack a Spartan-held position on high ground. The loadouts here are much more standard fare, the Elites getting their own evasive roll as their 'equipment', and after a few assaults have been bounced back the Covenant break through and hold the location. The Spartans fall back to defending smaller, more exposed areas, and the loadout options change, allowing you access to more deadly weapons straight from the respawn.

But the Spartans can't hold their line. Here, Invasion enters its last stage, and flips a little: the Elites now have to carry a 'core' across relatively open ground to their waiting starship. Tables turned, and vehicles at the ready, the Spartans unleash everything: the Elites' theoretical route is a mess of rockets, tank shells, plasma



***Reach*'s textures add a new level of richness to the concrete and crates (even the Double Kill logo has a new metallic tinge), but this is still a world of bright colours shot with splashes of plasma**









***Reach* throws around all sorts of fancy particle effects, as well as jazzing up the usual repertoire: a yellow line trails in the wake of frag grenades, and the energy shields crackle and fizz as they're shot**

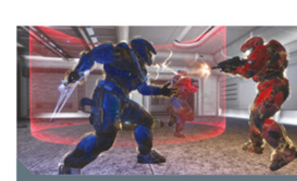
fire and lobbed grenades. Moving the core inches at a time, the battered Elite team finally manages a single break that gains enough yardage to make the win inevitable. The beta map is Boneyard, a gigantic area that opens out as the invasion moves through the stages, and one that would lend itself superbly to a big team battle – which, alas, wasn't an option this time around.

As for other modes, Generator Defense is mini-Invasion, with teams of three competing to defend or destroy generators, and doesn't quite have Invasion's push-and-pull quality (in its defence, we only tried it once). Stockpile is a CTF variant with neutral flags dotted all over the place: the twist is that you've got to hold flags in your 'zone' until a timer counts down, or you won't get the score – pile them high, and get defending. For Headhunter, see 'Skull-based gaming', and finally there's Team Slayer – you know what that's about. The class-based loadouts were available in the Team Slayer matches we played, but the full game will contain the option to play without for those who're looking for it.

There's plenty in *Reach*'s beta, in other words, and plenty to get excited about. Our glimpses of the frontend were brief, but it's clearly a step forward for the series, primarily in enabling easier access to your friends list. In-game, awards like Revenge and Opportunist (killing a reloading opponent) show *Reach* adopting the right kind of prompts, and the smart approach to persistent play (you'll earn credits for many, many cosmetic upgrades, but no practical ones) shows Bungie knows what regular players like, but won't sacrifice the game balance in order to realise it.

That could stand for *Reach* as a whole. Bungie has clearly studied the market, and some borrowings are more obvious than others. But nothing's stolen wholesale – everything's adapted and streamlined to fit *Halo*'s unique rhythm, so it's always balance before gimmicks and subtlety before sensation. *Halo: Reach* incorporates what players want, but is still unmistakably *Halo*. The message? A little bit of what you fancy does you good.

You don't automatically get skulls for kills in Headhunter – they come from corpses, and if you've indulged in overkill they'll go flying. Pick the wrong moment to gather them up, though, and you'll get shot up



Skull-based gaming

Headhunter's the best of the new modes we try: each enemy you kill drops a skull, which you collect and deposit in constantly shifting 'touchdown' zones to score. You can hoard as many skulls as you want, but when you've amassed several you're tagged for every other player as a rich target. It creates a weird mix of playstyles between those who are doing the killing and the vultures skittering around the outskirts looking to pounce on a weakened Spartan loaded up with skulls. If we sound bitter it's because our kill/death ratio put everyone else considerably in the shade, but we ended up fourth. Better get some practice in before the autumn.

FORMAT: **360, DS, PC, PS3, PSP**
PUBLISHER: **UBISOFT**
DEVELOPER: **UBISOFT PARIS**
ORIGIN: **FRANCE**
RELEASE: **Q3 2010**

Ghost Recon Future Soldier

One better than modern warfare, or a step backwards?

With its new invisibility cloaks, exoskeletons and shoulder-mounted rocket launchers it's easy to think Ubisoft's army series has laser-tagged the shark and is waiting for clearance to jump. We'll get to the weapons later, because it's actually the less immediate changes that indicate the big differences for this instalment. Ubisoft has a habit of shaking up familiar franchises, and this time it looks like it's *Ghost Recon*'s turn to be rattled.

The literal game-changer is that this is no longer a true squad-based shooter. You still have a four-man team, but they don't fall under your direct control. Instead they just sort of get on with it. The idea proposed by studio producer Adrian Lacey is that it's a far more realistic representation of special ops – small groups of elite soldiers who train hard so that when it hits the fan they don't have to wait to be told what to shoot.

In reality, that leaves you with two options. First, you're on your own at the mercy of several AI companions you hope aren't going to get stuck on a tree or wander off because they've seen something shiny. Or, second, you're playing drop-in/out co-op with a bunch of friends you hope aren't going to get stuck on a tree or wander off because they've seen something shiny.

Without orders and tactical elements, the gameplay we see demoed suggests a more immediate, action-oriented style, the closest comparison being something like *Uncharted 2: Among Thieves*, as soldiers vault walls and hunker down behind cover to return fire. The emphasis now is more on the gadgets. The series has always been famous for its hardware, but past *Ghost Recons* have stuck to using technology just far enough out of reach to feel both enticing and believable; this time, the selection of military toys pushes farther than ever before. But while it might look implausible it's all, once again, real tech – there are several stealth cloaks in development right now, and the robo-leg exoskeleton enabling the engineer class to carry its equipment exists today (it's just that the yards of cabling and generators make them a little impractical in genuine combat situations).





The Ghosts look more sci-fi than ever. The new helmet is a result of feedback from special ops troops explaining that they're always facing danger, so there's no point armouring the sides. Plus, hearing stuff is really useful

One more twist to the familiar is that while these gizmos are limited to specific classes, you can still make use of all of them. A quick breakdown includes things like the invisibility cloak for the recon class, a shoulder-mounted homing missile for the commando, air and ground drones for the engineer, and acoustic sensors to help snipers locate targets. There are others, but the key thing is that you can use any of it if you're standing near enough to its owner. Accessing your team's gear is definitely fair enough if you're telling the commando what to target with a missile, or using the sniper's sensors to locate targets, but cloaking just because you're next to the guy with the cloak feels odd in a series that usually prides itself on authentically tinged action.

Getting in close to your teammates doesn't just get you access to their gear (and maybe a quick hug); it also enables you to 'link up'. If you've played *Army Of Two*, or seen footage of *Metal Gear Solid: Peace Walker*, you'll know the system – you can join up with another solider so that one of you takes point, moving, while the rest of your team daisychains behind, covering all the angles. With more emphasis here on a 360-degree



The new ground drone isn't just for ordering around and hiding behind – it's a fully playable multiplayer class. But how will several hundred pounds of armoured robotics be balanced?





Unconventional means

The multiplayer part of the game looks fairly standard at first. Then you realise the option to link up and share abilities creates a weird and alien teamwork mechanic. Up to four people can join, with the leader steering the party as the others take out opponents. Now throw in the ability for everyone to be cloaked using the recon ability while you designate targets for the commando's rocket launcher and you have something unusual. It'll be interesting to see how it all balances out.

battlefield and less linear progression during missions, Ubisoft is hoping that this combat conga will feel like natural survival behaviour. The aim is to better recreate what real-life special ops go through – going in unsupported behind enemy lines, improvising tactics and trying to complete the mission however they can.

Ironically, modern weapons and gear mean that war is now happening at closer quarters. If you've played *Modern Warfare 2* online then you know never to leave the alleys when the helicopter arrives. In real life, air strikes and close support mean soldiers fight in cities and other areas that can't be blown into chunks via satellite. So the combat we witness involves quick dashes between sandbags and cars on a rural Norwegian road on the trail of a gang of ultranationalists who've deposed the Russian president. Gunfights are measured in distances of yards and new CQC moves see enemies manhandled to the ground or downed with sliding tackles.

It's definitely shaping up to be a new take on the series, using the ingredients that make up *Ghost Recon* – the gear, the special forces sent in when the mission can't fail, and the little glowing eye-piece – and wrapping it up in a faster, more mainstream adventure. The new *Recon* looks like it's about smoother, more immediate action. Even the characteristic drones have been upgraded. The air drone now comes fitted with a machine-gun and can be directly controlled, while the new ground model is equally lethal, trundling through locations, drilling terrorists without risk and even appearing as a playable class in multiplayer.

It's been a while since the last *Ghost Recon* and, chances are, fans are going to be raising eyebrows at the changes, but things have moved on. In the wake of mainstream successes like *Mass Effect* and *Uncharted* creating more immediate and dramatic adventures, you can see the reasoning behind the changes. There are no cutscenes, for example. The plot is relayed through playable chapters – controlling one of the Russian president's bodyguards during the coup, say. Whether this new direction is a rebirth, or kills the series, depends on how the new, streamlined action plays. We should get some hands-on time soon.

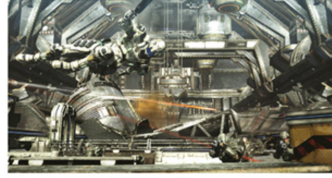
> The combat we witness involves quick dashes between sandbags and cars on a Norwegian road on the trail of ultranationalists who've deposed the Russian president



The story kicks off with a military coup in Russia, but the action revealed so far focuses on Norway. Hopefully the European setting will provide welcome contrast to deserts and baking sun









Expect plenty of these bullet-hell moments to crop up throughout *Vanquish* – they force fast and zigzagging escapes across the terrain, perfectly showcasing the suit's defensive capabilities and testing your control of them

FORMAT: **360, PS3**
PUBLISHER: **SEGA**
DEVELOPER: **PLATINUM GAMES**
ORIGIN: **JAPAN**
RELEASE: **WINTER**
PREVIOUSLY IN: **E213**

Vanquish

There are guns and big robots, but we only have eyes for the white suit

It tells its own story when the makers of a newly announced game want to get people playing it as soon as possible. No slow-leak campaign for *Vanquish*, no phalanx of videos, screenshots and what-ifs to wonder about before the real thing turns up. It's in our hands now.

The confidence of Platinum and Sega isn't misplaced. For a full minute we do nothing but boost back and forth across the demo's opening area, the thrill of the hero's breakneck speed matched by the fluid and graceful animation as he tears across the ground. Most players will do exactly the same thing, we predict. Movements are slicker and more context-sensitive than first impressions suggest, the suit able to hunker behind tiny bits of cover and gracefully vault over almost anything, even if it does have a habit of gliding along walls mid-somersault.

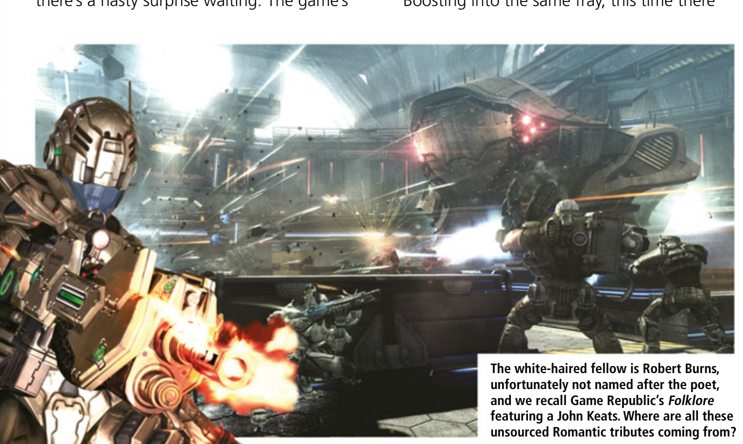
Boosting into the first pack of enemies, there's a nasty surprise waiting. The game's on Hard, and as we deliver a glorious haymaker the suit's all-purpose recharging energy bar is drained. All of its abilities depend on this swiftly replenishing power source, from boosts to enhanced blows. There's no health bar onscreen, so it also represents the suit's ability to shield you from fire – when hit, a red tinge and urgent beeping clues you in to the need to hide somewhere fast. So, in our current situation, cut off without cover and without the means to boost away, we're mercilessly cut down.

Normal difficulty is perhaps a more realistic route to asserting our valour. Boosting into the same fray, this time there are no misunderstandings with the suit. It zooms across the terrain at rocket speed, sticking to cover like Velcro, and now we're learning to link its abilities together – dropkicking a robot, hitting the aim button as we rebound to switch into mid-air slow-mo, getting the reticule just right over its face before pumping that trigger.

Any initial awkwardness with the controls dissipates fast, and you're soon trying all sorts of combinations: ripping through a group too fast for them to follow, leaning back and shooting at the same time, cosmic punches that take out multiple opponents at once, execution-style dropkick and shotgun combos, or (the favourite of a Sega producer) EMP grenades followed by methodical melee annihilation of everything caught in their blast. Like those first minutes of *Bayonetta*, it's clear that here is a control system of considerable depth – one that makes you feel good for simply knowing what it can do, and feel amazing when you can do it.

We still need to be wholly convinced by *Vanquish*'s setting – although the title screen shows verdant and urban areas on the space station, inspiring more hope than the metal arenas we've played in and seen thus far. No doubt there are also many more suit upgrades and Mikami moments waiting behind the curtain to thrill. Even in a simple gunmetal environment against its standard enemies, however, *Vanquish* does nothing but shine.

The bigger they are, the more intelligent they seem to be: as soon as something like this turns up on the battlefield, your priorities have to change. Let it close the distance and it'll get right in your face with that enormous cannon



The white-haired fellow is Robert Burns, unfortunately not named after the poet, and we recall Game Republic's *Folklore* featuring a John Keats. Where are all these unsourced Romantic tributes coming from?

Die, robot

A fairly simple question: is shooting robots ever going to compare with shooting fleshy things that release giblets upon exploding? You'd be forgiven for thinking not. *Vanquish* proves otherwise – because, in effect, these robots are crammed with both alien and human characteristics. Visually reminiscent of *Mass Effect*'s Geth, and definitely somewhat inspired by the Covenant, their movement and sound effects are more organic than mechanic. There's a fireworks moment whenever you blow up an especially vulnerable part – sparks and metallic chunks flying out from a puff of grey smoke. The visual feedback's certainly there alongside the sense of hostility. We're looking forward to getting right down to the nuts and bolts.



APB

All units converge on Realtime Worlds' online urban shooter



FORMAT: **PC**
PUBLISHER: **EA GAMES**
DEVELOPER: **REALTIME WORLDS**
ORIGIN: **UK**
RELEASE: **2010**
PREVIOUSLY IN: **E204, E209**

"Everything will be evolving – that's something I want the game to be known for," says **David Jones**, creative director of *APB*. Realtime Worlds' massively multiplayer online action game might still be a few months from release, but the ways in which the game could develop post-launch are already a popular topic at the studio.

To recap the basics, players will take the role of either criminals or enforcers in order to participate in a perpetual turf war resulting from each faction's desire for dominance in the city of San Paro. As important as the dynamically evolving conflicts which spring up as a result of this rivalry is the game's powerful customisation feature, designed to be, in Jones' words, "a pure tool for self-expression".

As a criminal, our first mission is to gently persuade the members of a jury to return a 'not guilty' verdict by torching a variety of their belongings. En route to one of our targets, the game matches us against a group of enforcers whose mission is now to ensure the failure of ours. The running battle which ensues escalates along with both teams' objectives, and what begins as a back-alley shootout becomes a street-wide skirmish before morphing into a car chase across the district.

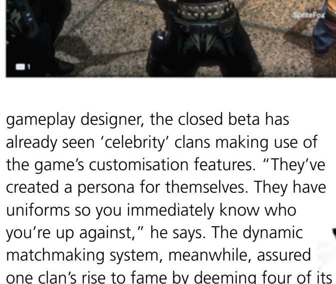
Once the mission's over, however, all hostilities end. *APB*'s default ruleset ensures that PVP isn't an option until the players are despatched against each other by the game. Post-launch, however, Jones envisages a variety of rulsesets emerging to cater to the needs of distinct kinds of players. This will be possible due to *APB*'s system of servers, subdivided into 'districts' of around 100 players. "We've been playing internally with chaos districts, where you can shoot anyone at any time – that's a completely different game," Jones explains. "It's war, and certainly not a place I'd want to put a brand-new player into, so we hope to roll those out not long after launch." Other potential tweaks involve opening up positional targeting, shifting the game's focus to sniper-based play.

APB's greatest ambitions may not be structural, however, but social. Realtime Worlds hopes that the systems behind *APB* will in combination create an environment in which online 'celebrity' can flourish. In the short term, players on a run of successful missions will find themselves opened up as a target for the entire district, while those who top league tables will be immortalised as a statue at various 'display points' around the city. According to **Jesse Knapp**, *APB*'s lead gameplay designer, the closed beta has already seen 'celebrity' clans making use of the game's customisation features. "They've created a persona for themselves. They have uniforms so you immediately know who you're up against," he says. The dynamic matchmaking system, meanwhile, assured one clan's rise to fame by deeming four of its members a significant enough threat to be pitted against 11 other players mid-mission.

The biggest challenge facing *APB* is, fittingly, one of self-expression. Realtime Worlds' fusion of traditional MMOG infrastructure and action game mechanics runs the risk of alienating players expecting a title which more rigidly adheres to one of the many genre templates from which the game has been built. The studio's dedication to providing an experience adaptive to players' needs and demands is admirable, but it would be a shame if such demands overshadowed its original vision.



Clans will be able to buy billboard space to announce their recruitment drives. Players can also show their affiliations in a less official manner through the spraying of graffiti at designated points throughout the city



Who would want to play as a cop? When you can arrest your opponents and leave them yelling impotently as they wait to respawn, quite a lot of people, apparently

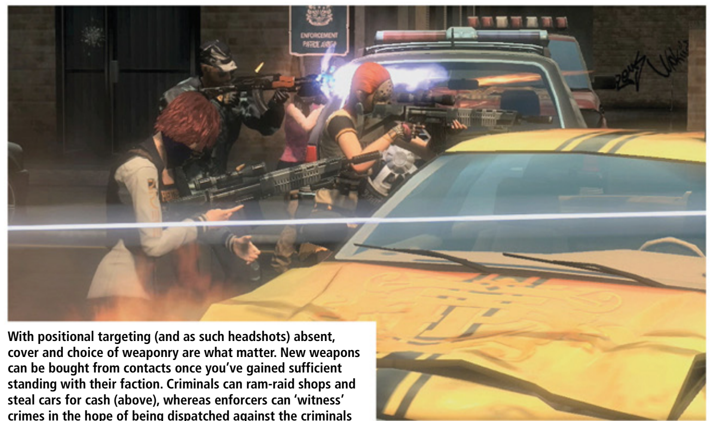


Gangsta fashionista

Jones demonstrates the game's player customisation features as the demo begins. *APB*'s intimidatingly broad range of options extends all the way from the definition of your avatar's muscles to the age of their clothes. More creative players will be able to design logos and patterns to apply to clothing and vehicles, and may even find doing so to be a rather profitable enterprise – Jones, who readily admits he's "not very arty", says he prefers buying his apparel from more creatively talented players. Those with a musical ear will find their skills to be particularly valuable – a good theme (an eight-second musical trademark felled opponents are forced to listen to while they respawn) can apparently make a killing on the game's black market.







With positional targeting (and as such headshots) absent, cover and choice of weaponry are what matter. New weapons can be bought from contacts once you've gained sufficient standing with their faction. Criminals can ram-raid shops and steal cars for cash (above), whereas enforcers can 'witness' crimes in the hope of being dispatched against the criminals



FORMAT: **PC**
PUBLISHER: **IDEA GAMES**
DEVELOPER: **BOHEMIA INTERACTIVE**
ORIGIN: **CZECH REPUBLIC**
RELEASE: **SUMMER**

ArmA 2: Operation Arrowhead

Get your just deserts in the expandalone to Bohemia Interactive's sprawling war sim

Of the many things we scrawled on our wishlist as we played *ArmA 2* (see **E**204), 'more content' was a pretty low priority. Yet the supersized war sim is to receive just that – a new campaign two thirds the length of the original's, this time taking you to the fictional deserts of Takistan.

It's a little more focused than the earlier game, both in terms of the number and order of individual objectives and the overall branching campaign structure. It's apparently a little easier too. But we wonder if, given the power of *ArmA 2*'s mission editor and the willingness of the community to use it, a new campaign addresses the real issues that held the notoriously buggy game back from greatness. To be fair to Bohemia, it spent a good six months putting paid to *ArmA 2*'s many and varied launch issues. The original game is now stable, AI helicopter pilots no longer exhibit full-blown psychosis, and the broken, robotic barks of your squadmates have become ever so slightly less robotic and broken. But those hoping for comprehensive changes with this expansion, like a renovation of the squad-management system into something that is as swift and usable as, say, talking to a real live squad, may have to wait a while longer. AI still finds navigating the terrain tricky, even though the arid desolation of Takistan provides less in the way of obstacles, and cover, than *ArmA 2*'s setting. Your squad's survival skills are subsequently woeful. Oh, and clipping issues mean you still can't turn around in doorways.

But what the campaign does bring is a handful of wonderful new toys. When viewed as a vast asset pack for the game's incredibly active modding community, its real attraction becomes clearer. There are new weapons, vehicles and aerial drones; aircraft now come with missile countermeasures; bullet drop can now be mitigated with adjustments to your rifle scope; building damage is more finely modelled; and thermal imaging is now accurate down to the individual body parts. Then there's Takistan itself – an Afghanistan-alike, replete with dusty plains and rocky mountains, minarets and mosques. Its size boggles, and promises to be a very appealing canvas for would-be mappers and modders.

There's also the distraction of *Arrowhead*'s armoury. It's not a new feature in itself – *ArmA 2* also allowed you to instantly try out weapons and vehicles – but now it offers the option of an escalating challenge mode. Accept a mission and you'll suddenly be faced with a wave of enemies to gun down with your sniper rifle, or be asked to pull off a 360 in your fighter jet. It's a cute ancillary to the larger, more powerful editor, and one that underscores *ArmA 2*'s draw as a simulation toybox rather than a straight-up shooter. Once again, co-op multiplayer looks likely to be the only way to experience the campaign properly but, as with *ArmA 2*, there promises to be as much pleasure in creating conflict as engaging in it.



Bug hunt

While we're certain Bohemia Interactive will produce a polished and stable release candidate, it's hard to know what issues are bugs and which are endemic flaws carried over from the previous game. Chucklesome failures, such as when an enemy turns green and flickers between prone and standing, are clearly to be rooted out, but issues like the AI's lacklustre pathfinding are probably here to stay. They seem baffled by Takistan's slopes and tend to give up and lie down waiting to be shot. But it wouldn't be an *ArmA 2* game without a few glitches, would it?



The editor, as ever, almost immediately distracts us from the campaign, allowing us to quickly set up scenarios that test our scissor-paper-stone theories on all manner of tanks and aircraft





In a savage commentary on real-world conflicts, neither the Takistani militia nor the US troops seem too concerned about accidentally gunning down crowds of civilians – and none of them are even holding camera equipment







The landscape is pretty bleak, but fewer trees and low building density bring some performance improvements


YOUR WEAPON...
SEDUCE.
COERCE.
SABOTAGE.
STEALTH.
SUBVERT.
STEAL.
WWW.ALPHAPROTOCOL.COM



These early levels already outdo the first game's. Here, Maxwell plops ingredients into a cauldron to whisk up a potion. Elsewhere, the dictionary helps him conjure signs of the zodiac and infiltrate a game launch event

Scribblenauts 2

Who would win if you could summon Thor, a bear and an accountant for a fight? Answer: everyone

FORMAT: **DS**
PUBLISHER: **WARNER BROS INTERACTIVE**
DEVELOPER: **5TH CELL**
ORIGIN: **US**
RELEASE: **TBA**

The original *Scribblenauts* was a good prospect with its promises of 'write anything, solve everything'. If only 5th Cell had mentioned the third, unspoken promise: 'fall down every hole'. Capable of summoning some 20,000 nouns out of the ether, rooster-headed hero Maxwell was not so hot when it came to jumping. Or, indeed, stairs, ladders, driving, flying or even opening boxes. Guided with vague stylus prods, he was all nouns and no verbs.

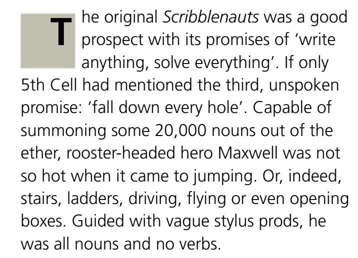
Second time out, Maxwell can still apply lipstick to Chuthlu, only he does it from the safety of a D-pad. Mistakenly tapping around objects, often mere pixels wide, no longer sends the hero on a death march; items and their application are the sole duty of the stylus, tucking them safely out of the reach of our overenthusiastic avatar. Likewise, the camera no longer snaps back on Maxwell after seconds of inactivity, allowing planks to be glued to nuns without the dreaded scrolling breaking up the party. Both changes confirm what we already knew: the objects are the star of show.

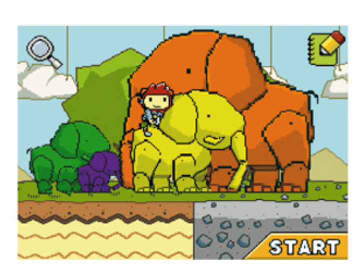
Where sequels traditionally opt for bloat, *Scribblenauts*' already comprehensive vocabulary needs little expanding. Instead, the few new nouns lean towards oddball showing off – cosplay costume, dragon egg, elixir of life, cryptozoologist and bling – or bolster the roster of lawsuit-free names. Tired of fighting all Maxwell's battles, God now has some respite in the form of Thor, Guy Fawkes and the Easter Bunny. Always more confident with leftfield requests (inevitably reached for first), it's no surprise to see a cloning machine causing some Prestige-esque cat-duplicating havoc.

Rather than grow out, the vocabulary grows up with the addition of adjectives. Where the original nouns answered to criteria set by 5th Cell's 'Objectnaut' system, descriptions allow this DNA to be refined or rewritten. Obvious physical properties offer little more than a texture reskin. It's hard to see how a striped cow differs from a normal cow. A petrified cow, on the other hand, makes a handy weight, and saves you the hassle of tricking Medusa into doing your dirty work. More interesting, at least from a puzzle perspective, is playing with character AI. Rewrite a wild animal as docile and he can be ridden, for example.

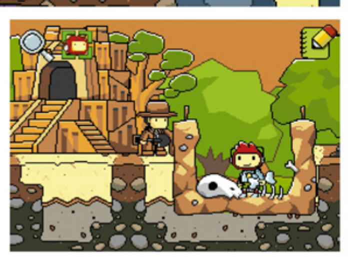
We wonder how great a difference adjectives will make. Was not the aim of the original's hulking word bank to force players to embrace the defining characteristics of any individual item they could imagine? The ability to redefine items surely undermines the point of having so many in the first place – who needs a boulder when they can magic up a stone helicopter? The first game was too easily beaten with a handful of super objects – jetpacks and God. Should we now fear the rise of the super adjective? 'Flying' or 'almighty' might get the job done.

In this sense, 5th Cell's 'write anything, solve everything' seems to be leaning towards the former, championing the creativity of the system over the act of solving. In celebrating scope, some of purpose risks fading away. Fine for those with a head full of ideas, perhaps less enthralling for those of us simply happy to be armed with a controllable Maxwell and looking for the fun we were denied first time around.



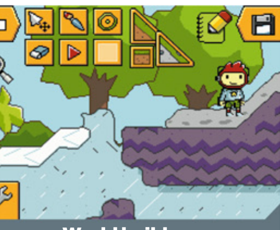


Before, levels were divided into action and puzzle categories, the former too easily overpowered with a couple of unbalanced levels. A heavier puzzle focus should coax more sophistication from lazier scribblers





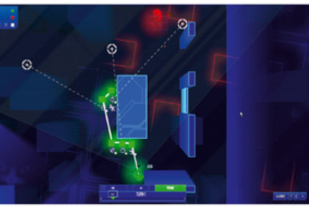
Scribblenauts' nutty physics – ropes could randomly sail across levels – have been tamed. Objects have a better sense of weight and a stickiness to prevent any jiggling



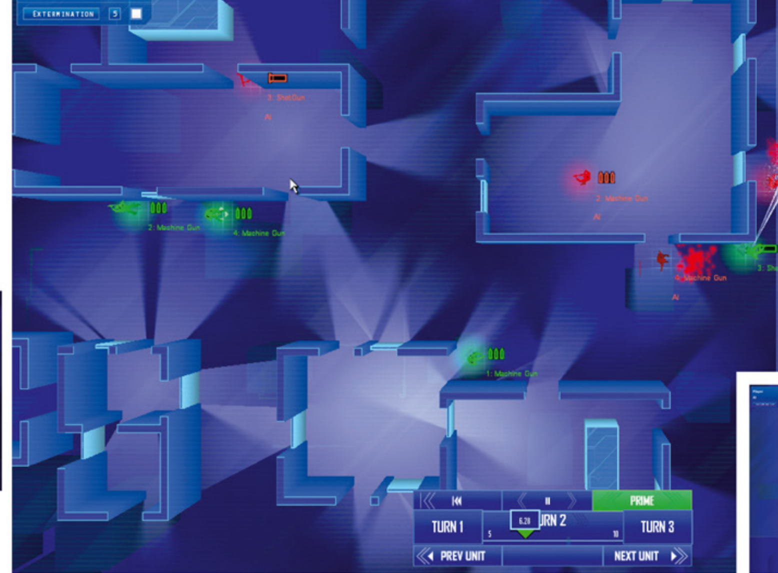
World builder

Scribblenauts' level creator felt like a clumsy afterthought. Letting you litter campaign maps with new objects, it was more of a level repopulator. The sequel presents a more thoughtful approach. After selecting a tile-set you can carve the land as you see fit before flooding it with clowns, knives and fax machines. Where objects would previously follow one programmed instinct, multiple objectives can now be given. Best of all is the opportunity to define win conditions to unlock the precious Starite. In the original, the Starite had to physically exist within the level – hiding it inside a box was about as sophisticated as it got. Much improved and much anticipated.


IS CHOICE...
STEALTH.
COERCE.
FIREPOWER.
UNDERCOVER.
SEDUCE.
KILL.
WWW.ALPHAPROTOCOL.COM



Although the game is intended to crack along at a fair pace, if you find yourself playing against an inveterate turtler you can start a new game in another tab and flip between them at a moment's notice



Frozen Synapse

Counter-Strike meets X-COM in Mode 7's succinct synchronised strategy game

FORMAT: **PC**
PUBLISHER: **MODE 7 GAMES**
DEVELOPER: **IN-HOUSE**
ORIGIN: **UK**
RELEASE: **Q1 2011**

In this age of open betas and perpetual after-launch development, release dates are becoming something of an irrelevance. Smart strategy game *Frozen Synapse* will get an official release next year, but preorders have already opened along with access to its multiplayer. And, rather than the beta being an offcut to tide early purchasers over until full release, our hands-on suggests that multiplayer is the first reason to dig out your wallet.

Two players direct squads of soldiers through small neon maps. The top-down perspective, with its half-Tron and half-blueprint abstraction, is not especially pretty, but *Frozen Synapse*'s bouts are precise and pacey. Both players plot waypoints for their soldiers simultaneously, indicating at each node the stance and direction of aim, before hitting 'play' and watching their plans collide. At any point during planning you can set hypothetical waypoints for your opponent's men, based on their last known positions, and test your own stratagem on the fly.

The game moves briskly, thanks to the small number of soldiers you have at your disposal, and play is more about smart positioning than it is micromanagement. Your particular squad's roster is randomised, keeping bouts fresh with a touch of the unpredictable, and each unit has its own behaviour – sparingly defined ciphers for mechanics which interlock to create all manner of interesting strategies. Machine-gunners are the staple, their automatic reaction to enemies based on line-of-sight making them good for overwatch duties. Those wielding bazookas can blast away cover, but need to be instructed to fire, while grenadiers can bounce their timed explosives round corners.

Our time with the simple Extermination gametype sees us score a very narrow victory, spending several tense rounds scuttling up and around the map's periphery before firing the first shot. We get a kill by sheer luck – instructing our man with the bazooka to dash to a doorway, fire down the corridor and then dive back into cover. The remaining enemies get it in the back while they're busy shooting another squad member to bits. But our inept first attempts do little to scrape the surface – there's clearly a lot that can be done with the simple behaviours *Frozen Synapse* throws into the mix.

Mode 7 has more than deathmatch up its sleeve, too. We're particularly intrigued by a gametype called Secure, which sees players place bids on how much territory they'll be able to defend. Since you can only start units in territory you've claimed, you must weigh up the sightline benefits of dispersed territories against a divided defensive line. There are hostage and bomb-defusal modes too, along with matches against the AI, but a full singleplayer campaign will be served only with the game's official release. Though the dev team isn't yet sure what this will entail, what's already been put on the table looks to be a meal in itself.



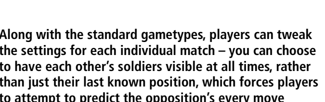


Although the make-up of your team is randomised, you always have the same loadout as your opponent. Even then the playing field isn't level, since the initial placement of your squad may not be to your advantage

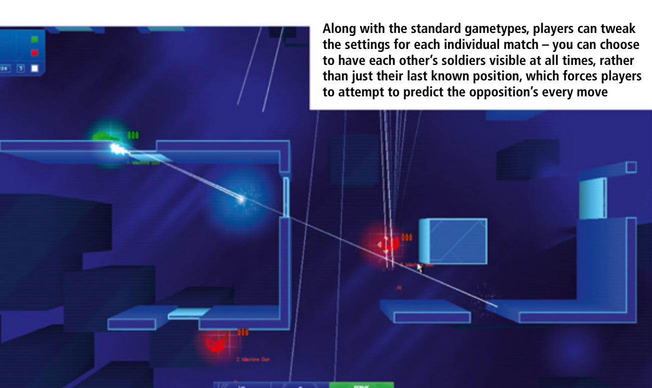


Community spirit

Community features may now be de rigeur in online games, but *Frozen Synapse* really does pile them in. There's a Twitter-esque news feed, of course, and extensive stat tracking and leaderboards, making note of your longest winning streak, total wins, and whether or not those were on maps which made things easier or tougher for you from the outset. You can also replay recordings of anyone else's matches in the game itself, and upload your own to YouTube.



Along with the standard gametypes, players can tweak the settings for each individual match – you can choose to have each other's soldiers visible at all times, rather than just their last known position, which forces players to attempt to predict the opposition's every move



FORMAT: **PC**
PUBLISHER: **CITY INTERACTIVE**
DEVELOPER: **IN-HOISE**
ORIGIN: **POLAND**
RELEASE: **MAY**

Sniper: Ghost Warrior

Polish studio City Interactive goes behind genre lines, but does it have a licence to thrill?



Going in for the kill is made easy by a wealth of visual aids – reduced considerably at higher difficulties

To encourage camping might be akin to pouring salt in an FPS lover's wound, but it hasn't stopped City Interactive basing its FPS on the shady business of hiding and shooting from the comfort of the undergrowth. Killing is a waiting game in *Ghost Warrior,* and picking a perch is at the top of your sneaky agenda.



So far, so realistic. Sensationalism comes in the slow-mo headshots – labelled Bullet Cams – that betray a filmic influence beneath the adherence to military gospel, and heighten the impact of a punctured cranium. Shootouts are last-chance saloons best avoided – your sniper-trained avatar is a master of one trade only, hence such exchanges are intentionally clunky and not suited to the densely packed environments of the game.

The South American setting is as crucial to survival as the cold steel in your hands. The swaying undergrowth and varied climates vastly affect your chances in *Ghost Warrior* and require careful thought and controlled breathing. Gravity is a further consideration, with bullet-drop and pitch affecting the path of your widow-making rounds.

Ghost Warrior's world is vivid and believable, if a little by-the-numbers. Water blurs the HUD convincingly and textures are appropriately crisp and concise, ensuring any misfires are a product of your shaking hand rather than the designers'. The recon





Some missions see you take on a role in a special operations task force, playing a character who is most definitely not a sniper but more of a traditional FPS soldier, though it remains to be seen how these will gel with the main story and its single-shot ethos

mission we see builds steadily towards an explosive evacuation run, guided by your instincts and the voice in your ear. AI-controlled spotters guide you through certain sections alongside traditional objective markers, but whether this mechanic is translated effectively into a multiplayer mode remains to be seen.

It's the lack of personality that may hinder *Ghost Warrior*'s trajectory towards the charts: the clichéd, stereotypical narrative about an evil anti-American regime has been exhausted by the genre to the point of collapse. With less generic scenarios and a few more standout set-pieces, however, it could still hit the mark.

Solarobo

It's raining cats and robots in CC2's commemorative shot at the big time

FORMAT: **DS**
PUBLISHER: **CYBERCONNECT 2**
DEVELOPER: **IN-HOUSE**
ORIGIN: **JAPAN**
RELEASE: **2010**

Developer CyberConnect 2 is celebrating its 15th birthday this year, and marking the occasion with *Solarobo*, a DS action RPG.

Although hardly a household name in the west, the studio has a solid reputation in Japan and made its name with the *.hack* series of RPGs on PS2. The shift to DS is an interesting one, however. Like much of the Japanese industry's high-profile releases of late, it may be that the company has its sights on global appeal – and sales.

Set within a world of floating islands and ships in which two races – distinguished as cat and dog people – coexist, the story follows a boy and his pet. Conceptually, the title's nearest relative is the developer's own 1998 title *Tail Concerto*. The hero, Red, navigates a world of Sky Robos (worker-bots) and intrigue in what looks to be a non-linear story.

Mostly set on an isometric map, there's a familiarity grounding your initial experience, and CyberConnect 2 is adamant *Solarobo* will get the most out of the hardware's admittedly modest polygon-pushing power.

There's a cinematic quality to the proceedings that ensures the Ghibli-esque tale of cats and dogs is engaging. Animation studio Madhouse, famous for the anime series Hells Angels, has been recruited for lavish cinematics, and with pre-production well underway on the developer's fully fleshed world there are rumours of a spinoff series for *Solarobo* itself. Though it's becoming a crowded market for story-based adventures on DS, CyberConnect 2 clearly possesses a unique IP that may well warrant such grand ambition.



In development for three years, *Solarobo*'s production has evolved along with the hardware itself, from Lite to DSi and even the XL. Each iteration meant a revision

For starters, there are two modes of play: on foot and in your Sky Robo. The former is a traditional blend of action and puzzling, while the Robo comes in handy for the catch and return of a stray rocket or two. The decision about when and how to use the Robo is one of your more pressing demands, and as interesting as it will be to see a story of might and magic blended with futurist mech behemoths, it's equally tantalising to see how an optional vehicle will infiltrate the world of the portable RPG.

CyberConnect 2, with a protracted development time and history of vibrant design work, is certainly aiming high here. Claws crossed for arena-based mech battling, then.



A form of network play is planned, although not detailed at the moment, with both ad-hoc and online Wi-Fi compatibility promised



FORMAT: **WII**
PUBLISHER: **NINTENDO**
DEVELOPER: **ARTOON**
ORIGIN: **JAPAN**
RELEASE: **SUMMER**

FlingSmash

A complicated concept in which an object can be 'flung' to break, or 'smash', blocks. Got it?



A delightful piece of say-what-you-see titling: you fling, it smashes. It being Pip, a cross between an orange and a pinball. The game itself blends further elements: a dash of *Breakout*, a sprig of *Peggle*, not to mention the arcade multipliers and combos of *Donkey Kong Jungle Beat*.



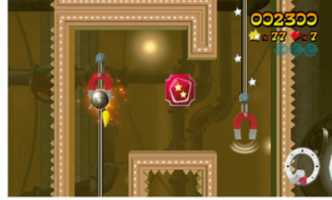
What is chaotic enough alone is insane with two players. Working towards one score, the point counter frantically climbs as the screen is demolished in unison. A touch unnecessary, but the balls seem to love it

As the screen scrolls left or right (mirrored for the left-handed), flicking the MotionPlus-equipped Remote sends our spherical hero thumping through an incoming course of bricks. Fail to carve a route, though, trapping yourself against the pursuing screen edge, and a dragon eats you. Naturally.

What initially feels like mindless flailing bereft of MotionPlus benefits soon morphs into more thoughtful flailing bereft of MotionPlus benefits. Pip broadly follows the launch angle, and such is the chunky design that he needn't be more accurate. Basic ricochets ping into hidden areas, while careening into keys unlocks branching routes. In a moment of dizzy fruit-machine fun, bashing three fruit tiles modifies Pip. Three limes bloat him into a Katamari-esque orb of mass destruction. Cherries split him into mischievous multiballs. Around they go and up goes the score.

Persistent flailing bullies through the level (though you get told off for excessive waggling), but high scores require finesse. Timed challenges give three blocks to be slammed in numerical order. Elsewhere,





Later levels introduce new varieties of Pip. In this stage he is metal, weighing down his movement and forcing more vicious wrist action to get moving. Using magnets to navigate obstacles feels more like a normal platformer

red blocks fizz denoting a multiplier if hit in succession. Levels end with one final bid for points: a single flick to puncture walls dotted with high scoring bricks. In a nice touch, your run is plotted on a graph, charting your score along the level layout – what other game points out where you could do better? Heed the advice and get back in for a fling.

Such is the score focus that the campaign cladding feels redundant. As fun as ricocheting into an armoured boss's underbelly may be, bouncing up the leaderboard is the real appeal. Can it entertain in the long run? We limber up our wrists in anticipation.



FORMAT: **WII**
PUBLISHER: **RPG**
DEVELOPER: **MONOLITH SOFT**
ORIGIN: **JAPAN**
RELEASE: **JUNE 10 (JAPAN)**


The setting is certainly unique, but how much the player will be able to appreciate that they're exploring a titanic corpse is unclear. Takahashi promises that the game will strongly convey a sense of verticality, and trailers show many flying enemies

Xenoblade

Monolith Soft stands on the shoulders of giants in a new RPG

It's not every day Nintendo goes shopping for a new studio, but when it does, it's usually for good reason. *Xenoblade* is the first major project to result from the acquisition of Monolith Soft in 2007 and, along with Mistwalker's *The Last Story*, is one of two major new JRPGs set for release on Wii this year.

Xenoblade's world is giant. Two giants, in fact. The game's backstory sees an epic battle take place between a pair of titanic beings deep in the primordial past. The two gods – one organic, one mechanical – struck simultaneous killing blows, and their corpses stand frozen to the spot where they died. Entire civilisations (human and robotic) have developed on and inside their bodies, and have carried on the conflict where the two colossi left off.

In a direct response to RPGs which guide the player through a linear and constrained series of narrative events, producer Tetsuya Takahashi wants *Xenoblade* to offer players an experience built around exploration and adventure, a fact reflected by both the amount of freedom offered to the player


Xenoblade has nothing in common with Takahashi's previous *Xeno* games. The game's as-yet-unconfirmed western title is *Monado: Beginning Of The World*

and the level of detail in the game's environments. Such freedom means players will have to learn for themselves which areas are safe to visit at an early level and which will require a return trip, lest they stumble across one of the robotic foes roaming the game's environments. If they do, the transition in and out of combat will be seamless, and once battle begins, standard attacks by your team of three occur automatically, with the player manually selecting special attacks known as 'arts'.

Finally, Takahashi promises that grinding levels will form as small a part of the title's playtime as possible. While *Xenoblade*'s setting might be its most immediately striking feature, it's Takahasi and Monolith Soft's desire to address the more player-wearying aspects of the JRPG that might be its most important one.

Get On



If you think virtual motorbikes are fun, you should try the real thing

It isn't just concerns for the environment and personal finance that are driving more and more people to motorbikes and scooters. From counter-culture legend Easy Rider to today's resurgence in real-world motorsport, their freedom and versatility have timeless appeal. While cars become homogenous and stigmatised, bikes remain defined by variety and character, their technology continuing to improve. The following are some of the best bike games out there, but nothing can ever truly simulate the real thrill.

Try biking for free

With more and more people embracing the freedom and thrill of two wheels over four, community site Get On has become a top destination for biking news and advice. Vespa or Harley, new rider or old, it has everything you need to keep the hassle factor low and the freedom factor high. Still unsure? Sign up for a free one-hour session at **www.geton.co.uk** and experience it for yourself, in capable hands and free of obligations.

Our promotion
Exclusively for **Edge** readers, Get On is offering the chance to win a CBT (Compulsory Basic Training) course and a £100 Gamestation voucher when you sign up for a free one-hour trial. Just visit **www.geton.co.uk/comp/edg** to find out more, and maybe take a few moments to discover the countless rewards that biking can bring.



The thrill of two virtual wheels



Tourist Trophy

From the master of *Gran Turismo*, Polyphony Digital, *Tourist Trophy* touts itself as 'The Real Riding Simulator'. A PS2 game, it hides its age well, while features such as the License School and Photo Mode make it a great two-wheeled companion to the world's most famous driving game series.



SBK 09

Milan-based racing expert Milestone obsesses over every detail of its bike games, the most recent version adding visible damage on fairings and rider leathers, and extraordinary depth of customisation. CAD data from manufacturers and organisers, furthermore, guarantees the utmost realism.



MotoGP 09/10

That coin-op legend Capcom has nudged this officially licensed sim to the edge of arcade territory should come as no surprise. Great for beginners or those looking for something bang up to date, the latest version brings a career mode focused on and off the track, culminating in the MotoGP World Championship.



Trials HD

Harking back to vintage TV show Kick Start (and unofficial game tribute *Kikstart*), *Trials HD* is a side-scrolling, easily controlled smash hit for Xbox Live Arcade. Winner of several awards for its combination of value, simplicity and surprising depth, its success speaks to the extreme flexibility of the stunt rider and their bike.



MX Vs ATV Reflex

For those who like it rough but still within the law, the *MX Vs ATV* series has carved quite the niche in both its genre and tracks. Bringing to life the fury of the Motocross circuit, this 2010 edition adds highly realistic terrain deformation, along with a nuanced Rider Reflex control system.

Visit www.geton.co.uk/comp/edg for your chance to win

DANES MACABRE

DENMARK-BASED INDEPENDENT DEVELOPER PLAYDEAD SHOWS US LIMBO, AN XBLA PLATFORMER PROMISING A RATHER EERIE WALK THROUGH THE WOODS

Three years ago, a minute-long video was uploaded online by the then two-man-strong independent outfit Playdead Studios. The clip – a bid to attract programmers to the company's first project – showed the silhouette of a young boy journeying through a ghostly, monochrome and two-dimensional forest, being attacked from the tree line by the spindly legs of a monstrous arachnid, and clambering between the cogs and gears of a massive, clanking factory. Three years, 14 (at peak) more members of staff, one move to a bright and airy top-floor converted apartment in the old quarter of Copenhagen later, and what was an animated concept has become playable reality, with *Limbo* due to be released on XBLA this summer.

The "platform, action, puzzle game" which casts the player as a nameless boy exploring a melancholy, unreal landscape, is the brainchild of Playdead's creative director and co-founder, **Arnt Jensen**. In early 2004, Jensen was working as a concept artist at Denmark's largest game studio, Copenhagen neighbour IO Interactive. It was around this time he first began drawing the black-and-white images that would eventually become *Limbo*, "The idea wasn't fully there," he explains. "There was no boy, but I had a sense of the atmosphere in this black-and-white place." It would be another three years before Jensen, with the help of fellow ex-IO employee **Morten Bramsen** (who went on to be *Limbo*'s only artist), eventually produced a concept video in order to attract staff capable of coding the game. They were entirely unprepared for the response. Playdead found itself fielding queries from "over 30" publishers, and even travelled to the UK to meet a selection of the interested parties. Eventually, however, Jensen turned down an offer from one particularly keen publisher in order to retain control of the *Limbo* IP, a gamble which, following on from the game's strong showing at GDC (Playdead picked up awards for excellence in visual art and technical excellence at the concurrent Independent Games Festival), the team hopes is about to pay off.

> "WE WANT THE PLAYER TO DIE A LOT. IT'S FITTING TO THE TONE OF THE GAME. BUT IF YOU'RE GOING TO DO THAT YOU NEED TO BE GENEROUS TOO"

Our immediate thought on playing the near-finished game is just how close the experience seems to that early video and art. The boy's filled out a bit (Bramsen describes him a "a bit more cute," but such an epithet seems misjudged for a silhouette with burning white pin-pricks for eyes) but aesthetically the world of *Limbo* appears unchanged from the moment it was first brought to life.

The boy awakens in a forest that's at once oppressive and strikingly pretty, with glowing butterflies fluttering between looming trees. 'Black-and-white' fails to do justice to *Limbo*'s visual stye – which from the ashen, dirty water the boy sails over in an abandoned boat, through to the blurred, silvery hints of further landscapes in the backdrop, finds room for every hue of grey in between. Perhaps the biggest indication of the success of *Limbo*'s visual style is the fact that it's impossible to imagine it in colour.

Jensen cites film noir and German

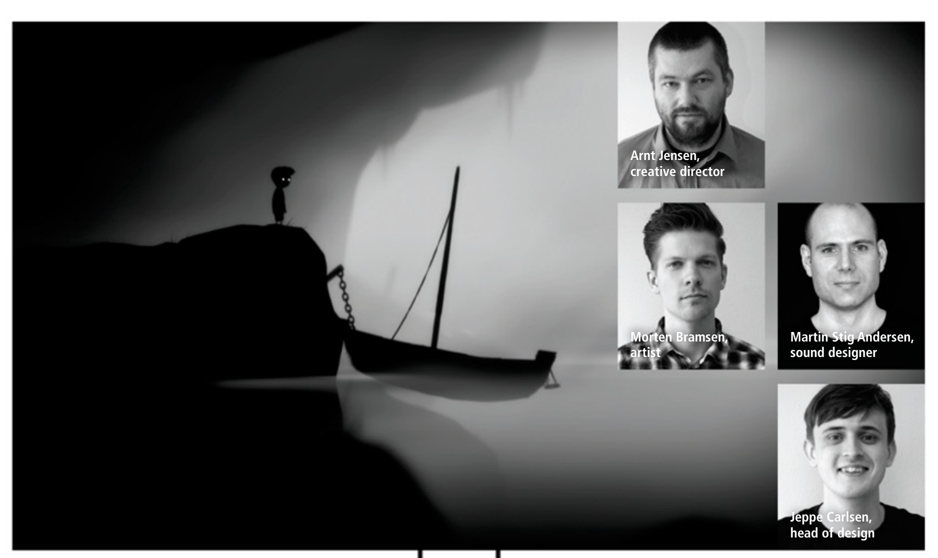


TITLE: **LIMBO**
FORMAT: **360**
PUBLISHER: **TBC**
DEVELOPER: **PLAYDEAD STUDIOS**
ORIGIN: **DENMARK**
RELEASE: **SUMMER**



expressionist cinema as major influences on the game's aesthetics, referencing FW Murnau's Faust as a particular inspiration. A look round the Playdead offices suggests some other influences as well. Black-and-white photographs of derelict buildings plaster the walls – Jensen points out pictures of an abandoned factory he's taken himself – while a rifle through the office bookshelf reveals black-and-white photography collections with titles like Paris By Night and compilations of children's horror stories sitting snugly alongside textbooks on videogame physics. The game's '20s cinematic influences not only extend to a flickering, grainy filter layered over the visuals, but to the sound design too. *Limbo* isn't quite a silent movie, but it comes close.

Traditional background music is absent, replaced by an ambient not-quite silence that foregrounds the crunching of leaves beneath the boy's feet, or the strangely disquieting screech of metal on stone. **Martin Stig Andersen**, *Limbo*'s sound designer, shows us how he's warped the quality of everyday sounds such as birdsong or a frog croaking by playing them back through a selection of the '30s-era reverb equipment sitting incongruously next to the hi-tech gear



Arnt Jensen, creative director

Morten Bramsen, artist

Martin Stig Andersen, sound designer

Jeppe Carlsen, head of design

The narrative is sparse, though the team, and the XBLA description, hint that the boy has entered Limbo in search of his lost sister

in his office, giving the same distant, otherworldly quality to *Limbo*'s sound design as can be found in its visuals. Andersen, whose background is in electro-acoustic composition, created much of the game's ambient sounds in a similar manner, and demonstrates how, by running sounds through an antique wire recorder, he can turn something gentle and melodic into a harsher, more unnerving piece. "I've read a lot of previews saying the game has no music," says Andersen, "but for me it's a question of definition. These sounds have the same structural purpose as music." What they don't have, according to Andersen, is the same emotional one. "There was a deliberate decision about not having background music which tells you how to feel about a given situation," he says. "If you don't have that emotional clue, you're left with your own interpretation of a scene."

CHILD'S PLAY

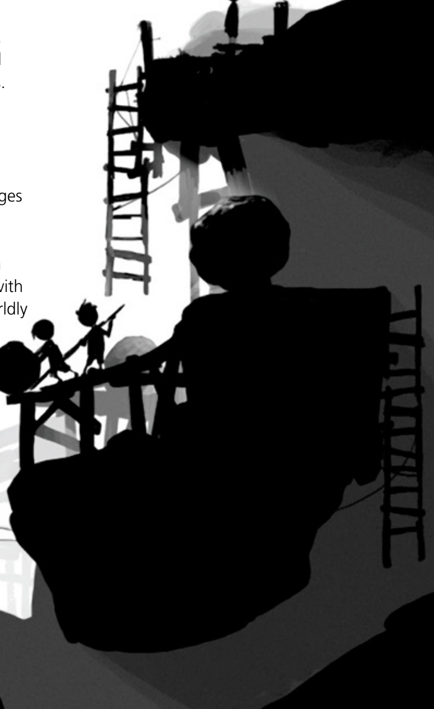
***Limbo*'s protagonist has been brought to life with the same physical principles as the rest of the world, and his interactions with it are equally convincing. The boy will automatically reach for a ledge or push against a wall as he gets close, for example. Better still is the instance when, as the boy tumbles, alongside a steel crate, around a large mechanical cog, he instinctively grips on to the box as it draws within reach in order to steady himself. The rest of the time his controls, while responsive, manage to express a slight hint of clumsy, childish exuberance.**

Certainly, there's plenty in *Limbo* that players will be left trying to interpret. Such as the identity of the hostile figures who've built ramshackle huts and dwellings within the openings woods, and the very nature of Limbo itself – our session with the game took us out from that gloomy forest and on to the roofs of a noirish cityscape, complete with flickering neon lighting and pounding rain, before descending into the mechanical core of a gigantic foundry. Still, most of the player's attention will focused on solving the game's puzzles.

These puzzles, in contrast to the aesthetics, have been constructed from some of gaming's most familiar ingredients – switches, blocks and ledges just out of reach. Underpinning every puzzle in *Limbo*, however, is a physics engine that requires players to apply a large dose of real-world logic, along with some lateral thinking, to this otherworldly landscape. **Jeppe Carlsen**, *Limbo*'s head of design, explains the reasoning behind this: "We knew that the game needed to be physics-based so that the very unreal world felt real, so that players felt it worked according to real principles."

One early, straightforward puzzle requires the player to break a crate from a fraying rope by jumping on the box until the line snaps. Next to this box is a second, firmly affixed crate, yet the combination of creaking sound effects and unstable swaying means players will be able to instinctively see which lines can and can't be snapped. As the game continues, puzzles increase in complexity to the point where entire rooms shift and rotate around the player, and other equally strange and initially confounding mechanics are introduced, yet the physical rules underpinning the experience remain constant and understandable throughout.

Limbo's control scheme, meanwhile, is admirably straightforward, with one button to jump, the other to grab items and throw switches. Carlsen explains how this shifts the focus on to the level design itself: "We started experimenting with the environment. Instead of giving abilities and items to the player, we'd give them to the world." The result is that the player must adapt to the shifting landscape, which constantly throws up new threats as well as mechanical



twists. Sometimes the two are combined, as in the case of the fungal growths which, dropping from the ceiling on to the boy's head, force the player to march ever forward.

Perhaps the most striking aspect of *Limbo*'s puzzles, however, is the often gruesome punishment for failing to solve them. The boy will find himself drowned, decapitated, impaled, crushed, electrocuted and squashed across the course of the game, and the combination of the game's convincing physics and unnerving sound effects can make some of the animations sickening. "We want the player to die a lot," explains Carlsen. "It's very fitting to the tone of the game. But if you're going to do that you need to be generous with restarts too. Never make the player solve a puzzle twice, for example." It's not just the player who ends up on the receiving end of this macabre violence, however. The giant spider representing the player's first real obstacle is initially defeated by placing a bear trap in the path of its stabbing limbs, and as for the beast's eventual fate, let's just say it would take a very desensitised player not to cringe. The tone, at times, is blackly comic – it's hard not to laugh when the game tricks you into believing that a patch of ground is the switch for a giant piston fixed above the path ahead, only to violently inform you otherwise when you step on the ground beside it.

Jensen sees this ever-present threat as part of a wider design philosophy. "I want the player to feel tense so they concentrate," he says. "It's the same reason the game's in silhouette – you end up analysing the environment to wonder exactly what a certain shape might be. It's why there's no emotional background music – so players have to decide for themselves how to feel."

It's also why *Limbo* is, at heart, a puzzle game – because that genre, above all, asks the player to think about the world they find themselves in, and requires them to decipher it. "It's good for the imagination," Jensen concludes, smiling.

While a puzzle game at heart, *Limbo*'s animation and physics make for a satisfying and responsive platformer

THE SCENIC ROUTE

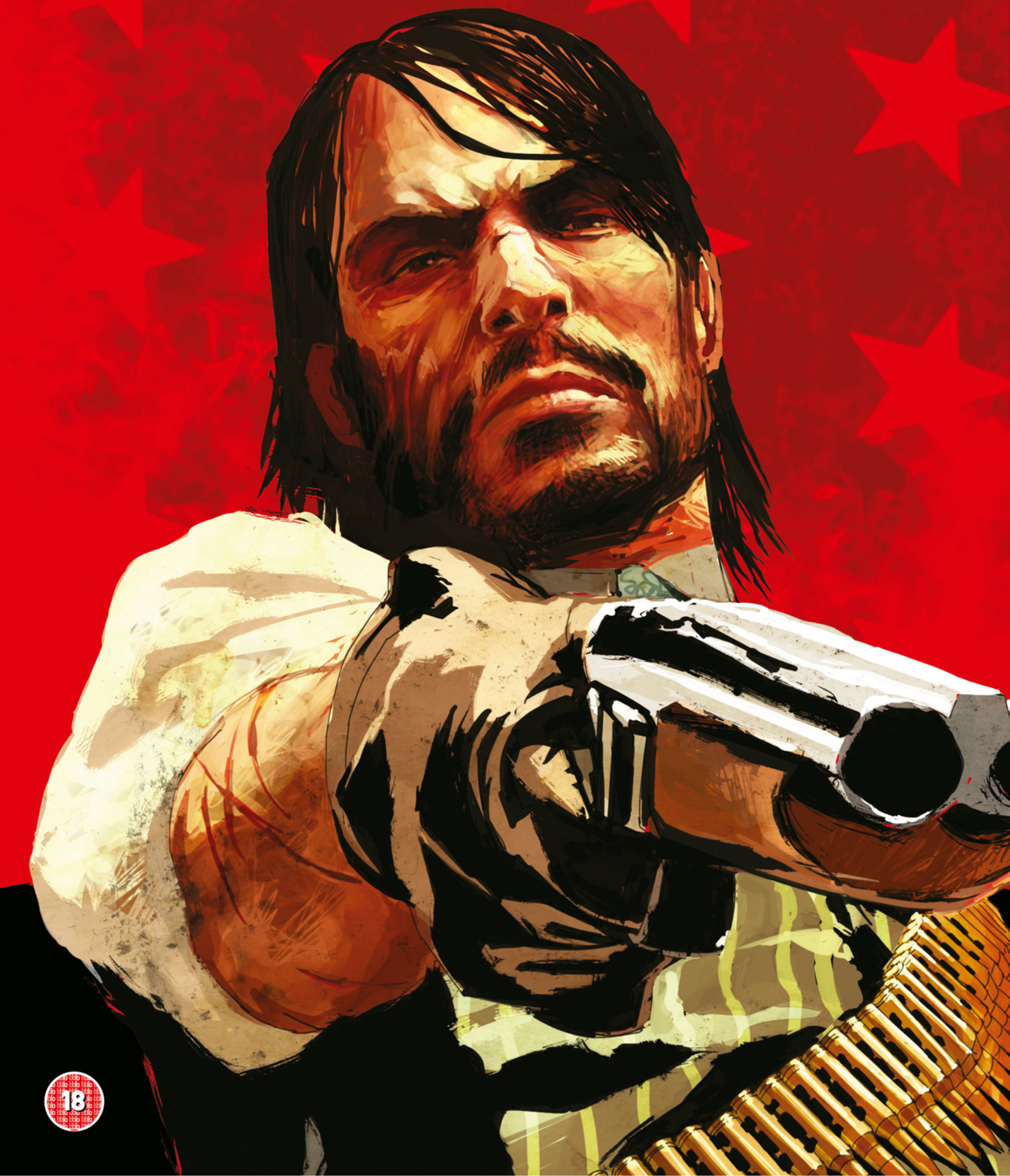
Such is the rather delicate nature of *Limbo*'s atmosphere that the team at Playdead was concerned that a sudden splash of lime green may spoil it. As such, Achievements have been squirrelled away to ensure that they're only earned by players who really go looking for them, complete with oblique hints in the descriptions. Their inclusion adds an explorative dimension to what is otherwise a linear, tightly designed game, and despite the team's misgivings feels more than welcome. There's also an Achievement for completing the game with less than five deaths, but, explains Carlsen: "Originally it was less than one, but the team at Microsoft said it had to actually be doable."







Limbo is home to some pretty disturbing sights (above), though of more practical concern will be its assortment of traps (right). From tumbling boulders to bear traps, not to mention the darts and spears of its inhabitants, there hasn't been such a variety of ways to die since _Resident Evil 4_


18



Creative class

Media Molecule reveals the toolkit that will take LittleBigPlanet from making levels to making games



When we first described the then-unnamed *LittleBigPlanet* back in spring 2007, we began with the little things. The way you can change Sackboy's expressions with the D-pad, and move his head and body with trigger buttons and tilt controls.

We eased our way into explaining a revolutionary game with an ethos – play, create, share – which was transcendent, beautiful and inspiring, and all too susceptible to being dragged to Earth with leaden exposition.

Seeing its sequel three years later, on a warm spring evening in developer Media Molecule's Guildford studio, we face a similar test. Not the same – we no longer have to explain *LBP*'s fundamentals. The original has sold over three million copies, and its players have uploaded 2.3 million levels and played them somewhere around half a billion times. Media Molecule, meanwhile, has now recruited ten per cent of its staff from its playerbase as designers, and 'play, create, share' has become almost common, a part of console games from *Guitar Hero World Tour* to *WarioWare DIY*, *Far Cry 2* to *ModNation Racers*.

This time around, the challenge is to tease the magical possibilities from a game which is the same – sort of. *LittleBigPlanet 2* is not a radical reworking of its predecessor. It's still, at base, a platformer with those divisive three planes and floaty handling. Edit mode looks and behaves the same. It will feature a set of Media Molecule-designed story levels, and will also be backwards compatible with all – or at least most of – *LBP*'s community levels.

But, alongside a new, sharper, graphics engine, Sackboy will bring with him some vital new tools. The kind of tools which have the potential to empower creators to levels far beyond what they could do in *LBP*.

"Prepare to have your head melted," says technical director **Alex Evans** as the core team members prepare to show off just what will make *LBP2* a step change. And then he says the sentence that's key to understanding what we get to see: "It's no longer about making levels, it's about making games."

And what games we see – and imagine – over the course of the presentation. *Asteroids*, *Snake*, *Micro Machines*, *Bionic Commando*, *Plok*, *Gradius*, *Choplifter*, *Puzzle Bobble*, *Shadow Of The Colossus*, *Space Invaders*, *A Boy And His Blob*.

***LBP* is already** home to brilliant, creaking imitations of some of these games, of course, and more besides. They only barely function and are hardly fun to play, but are awesome in their invention and proved very quickly that *LBP* was about more than platforming.

"One of the things that excited us most was when people did stuff that wasn't obviously platform games; when people took these tools and made a shoot 'em up or a calculator," explains creative director **Mark Healey**. "That was the spark for *LBP2*. We've added some über features to enable creators to make lots of different gaming experiences."

"The nice thing about making a game like this is that we could look at what people like," says Evans. "That crazy Japanese guy made a *Gradius* ripoff, but how do we make it so it's not just the crazy Japanese guy; how do we make it possible for a significant part of the create audience?"

So that's the philosophy. But what are the means? As ever with *LittleBigPlanet*, they're simple, artful and dizzyingly powerful. Media Molecule is well aware of how deep an impact an apparently small addition or new tool can make to the game, so each of *LBP2*'s new features we see is judiciously chosen. And, taken at face value, some are even slightly underwhelming.

To that end, when we're shown the grappling hook, the first of the



TITLE: **LITTLEBIGPLANET 2**
FORMAT: **PS3**
PUBLISHER: **SCE**
DEVELOPER: **MEDIA MOLECULE**
ORIGIN: **UK**
RELEASE: **WINTER**



presentation's reveals, we hardly feel our heads melting. A powerup in the mould of the paintinator from *LBP*'s *Metal Gear Solid* DLC, the hook is thrown out with R1 and attaches to any grabbable surface until you let go in the same way a grab would normally work. You can reel it in and out by pressing up and down on the stick, and also swing, your tether flexing with a satisfying 'boing'. "Like everything in *LBP* it's simple, physical and tactile and feels great," says Healey. "But you can get very good at it – there's a lot you can add with just that feature."

And so we begin a level together, one that will ship as part of a game that's called, at present, Tower Of Woop. We ascend its vertically scrolling height using bouncepads (another new addition) and by grappling on to sponge outcroppings, competing for score bubbles all the way. As a measure of mood, the music is Deodato's rendition of Richard Strauss' Also Sprach Zarathustra, that disco take on the piece made iconic by 2001: A Space Odyssey. As we get higher, the complexity rises, from a trifling swinging challenge to a gigglingly baroque arrangement of bouncepads and grapple points by its end, as if an expression of the designers' building confidence and inspiration as they explored a new tool.

"I'm looking forward to seeing how people mix it in," says Evans. "We'll use it purely – it's the community that does the mash-ups." And then you start imagining the possibilities – it would be trivial to attempt a *Bionic Commando*-style assault course, and surely the grapple could emulate *Half-Life 2*'s gravity gun. But it's in its interactions with all the other tools in the box that the grappling hook's real potential lies – including *LBP2*'s as-yet-unrevealed additional powerups, the only glimpses of which we get are their names in Popit: 'magic glove' and 'bag'.

There's no more time to wonder, though, because we're already on to the next stop. "In *LBP* we had non-player characters, but they were marionettes," says Healey. Media Molecule's homemade characters, built from the same materials as any level structure, had great personality but were hardly intelligent. *LBP2*'s NPCs, called sackbots, will be as intelligent as you want them to be. You can drop them into a level in Edit mode, whereupon they stand there until configured in a way just like any other object in the Popit. They can wear any costume you have, so they can look like any Sackboy, can be resized and animated to different movesets, from robotic to zombified.

Healey spawns five or six, sets them to act like zombies and has them follow Sackboy, and off they go, arms outstretched, chasing after him. Configure them to be harmful and electrify them and they're suddenly an enemy. You can set them to patrol and bind them into specific areas by tweaking whether they'll avoid danger, switch planes, be able to jump and be afraid of heights. It's possible to spawn 20 or 30 – the limit is defined by the thermometer. "We're trying to allow a lot more of everything, but it will crucially be a lot more balanced," says Evans. "Before, you'd hit your switch limit and you'd be done because it had a limit. Now we trade memory and CPU – lots of sackbots are fine, you just have to skimp elsewhere."

Is it possible to grapple on to a sackbot? Naturally. And what about making a massive one for an instant *Shadow Of The Colossus* boss? It works, if rather chaotically. And we jump into another of Media Molecule's levels for the finished game. Playing with Healey, we're tasked with rescuing sackbots from a factory styled with a mixture of Soviet industrial propaganda and *LBP*'s eclectic mash of pop and realism. Freeing each set of robots, which follow the nearest player and winningly sport hearts for eyes, increases the challenge of keeping the crowd safe from a variety of dangers such as crushing ceilings.

It's breezy stuff, and here, crucially, the AI is set to exhibit only basic behaviour. Intermediate level creators can have sackbots switch between preset behaviours – perhaps

"We're trying to allow a lot more of everything, but it will crucially be a lot more balanced"

Place the new level-linking 'badge' in your level and you can seamlessly transport players to another, useful for building multi-level games as well as for collector types to create level hubs for great levels that they've found – "a physical fan level," in Ettouney's words

22 LBP
Alex Evans, technical director

22 LBP
Kareem Ettouney, art director

22 LBP
Mark Healey, game director

LBP2's new engine isn't only about adding sharpness and solidity – it does a neat line in fluffy clouds and feathers, too. "It's our second stab at the tech," says Evans, who's looking forward to creators loading their *LBP* levels and going "Ooh!" at the visual upgrade

benignly patrolling until a player nears, whereupon they become electrified and chase after them. "But it's trivial to do that," Healey declares. "Wait for it – I'm going to reveal something about sackbots. They have a circuit board."

Microchips aren't exclusively for sackbots, but together they form a profoundly powerful symbiotic relationship. In *LBP*, the kind of complex logic boards which power the notorious 'Little Big Computer', a fully operational calculator, have to be situated in the level itself. But sackbots have a microchip which can be opened to reveal a discrete space for logic that's separate to the level itself. Logic which can inform sackbot behaviour, and is powered by a new set of gadgets that will ease the complexities of creating common electronic processes.

"That's where the fun begins," says art director **Kareem Ettouney**. In the hands of *LBP*'s most talented creators, it's hard to know the bounds of what they can achieve. "We will have an Intel in *LBP* – there will be someone who makes it," says Evans.

"I hope no one gets annoyed with the random gadget," worries Healey. "People have spent ages making their random devices, and now it's a single object." And that means logic is now portable. "It's a great thing for sharing," Healey continues. "For *LBP*'s end boss, the logic took up most of the level and was ridiculous – it was like old mobile phones with a battery that came in a case. Now, you can put it in a microchip and give it away as a toy."

Factor in the ability for creators to record performances for sackbots, moving them around as you'd move Sackboy, along with the option to record audio for character dialogue and voiceovers, and you can imagine them being given a real breath of life.

And, as with all these new features, recording performances also dovetails with another of *LBP2*'s big additions: machinima. "In the first game we had bits of story, and the features we had which supported it were limited – we had animated mouths and text bubbles." But when various players began to attempt to extend *LBP*'s potential as a storytelling device by using its limited camera-framing capabilities, the team realised there was an appetite for more formal tools.

They're aware that movie-makers might not have the same degree of interest in *LBP*'s lovably arcane tools as game creators, however. "We thought that we wouldn't only service the hardcore or the workaround creators," says Ettouney. "Making movies is a very different process – you don't do puzzles and progression, you do narrative and expression." It's a subject that's clearly

LBP2's microchips open up to reveal a space on which you mount electronics. Various gadgets make common functions, from control tweaks to random number generating, easier

LIGHT & MAGIC

A rebuilt graphics engine means that *LBP2* looks even better than its forebear – sharper, cleaner, and with a greater sense of physicality – "an extra sort of juiciness," in Evans' words. A share of tech with the *God Of War III* team means it's borrowed its depth-of-field effects. Objects are better defined with surrounding shadow, a result of ambient occlusion (an "Alex special"). Transparency effects for clouds and feathers and better lighting, with shadows, god rays, volumetric fog and objects, like burning wood, casting light – all of these features will also be applied to existing *LBP* content. "Play the Darkness story level – same content but fuck me it looks different," says Evans. The challenge, however, is to ensure the levels which exploited some of Evans' hacks to achieve transparency effects still work. "We may not get 100 per cent backwards compatibility, but I hope we do. It's a really hard job to QA it, with millions of levels to get through. So we might not succeed in all the exploits people have used."

Though levels will feature global lighting controls, the new engine also allows you to put filters over specific areas, including X-ray and outline effects. Want to create *Asteroids*? Simply make an arcade cabinet and place the vector filter over its TV screen



close to Ettouney's ambition for *LBP*. "We want to mix metaphors which haven't been mixed before, and make screenshots you haven't seen before. With the movie-making tools, you can show it. The thing with levels is the clash between functionality and aesthetic – if you want to get impressive and moody you can hinder the gameplay. Cinematic can unleash a new way of seeing *LBP*."

To demonstrate the simplicity of the tools, senior animator **Francis Pang**, who led the development of Sackboy in *LBP*, creates an instant music video. "I'd like the cinematic aspect to be fairly easy to get in to – as an artist I don't want to get into the electronics, I just want to frame the action," he says as he places ten sackbots onscreen and randomises their appearance from the test PS3's store of every DLC costume released so far. The stage has been ready-rigged – two torches are wired to flash on and off, but it's down to Pang to arrange and shoot it. He records a dance and applies it to all the sackbots by dragging a selection tool around them and places three cutscene cameras around the scene, setting their angle, zoom, depth of field, camera shake and transitions including cross-fade and zoom-fade. He then wires them to a randomiser gadget, sets the level to play, and that's the job done. The result, a pulsing, restless series of shots of crazily dressed gyrating sackbots, is surprisingly effective.

"That's how simple setting up the cameras is," says Ettouney. "Then you spend all your time dressing your sets, making your characters and flowing the story." We see one of the cutscenes Pang has made for Media Molecule's story, which takes place before the sackbot rescue level. Filled with assured pans and framing, it's narrated by a depressed robot called Clive, lamenting the invasion of his home, the Factory Of A Better Tomorrow, by space monsters. "It was a haven of neo-capitalism; good times," he moans. Considering it's currently being voiced by one of the programmers, it's already in good, knowing, wry shape.

"This was originally going to be the one feature in LBP2. It's so insanely powerful it hurts"

But it will have to stand up to the combined efforts of *LBP*'s community. "One of the really tough things for our poor little designers is that they have to compete with the community but have to use shonky, not-quite-finished tools," says Evans before explaining that now no designer at Media Molecule uses any other tools to create levels than the ones that ship with the game. "It's frustrating to me as a programmer because we've got all these tools that are now mothballed. They refuse to use them. It was an aim on the first game and now they're an albatross around my neck! No cheating or lying. They could have cheated – that's what's galling me! And they're not fucking cheating!"

This is all very well, but what about the whole 'making games' thing in *LBP2*? What we've seen before builds on what *LBP* already did, but there's no sign yet of that profound leap. Turns out it's our next stop. "This was originally going to be the one feature in *LBP2*," explains Evans. "This is so fucking insanely powerful it hurts."

Having seen it, we still haven't quite got our heads around the full potential of what it can do. But we do know it currently sports quite the worst name for any game-changing feature you've ever heard: the SixAxis Direct Control Seat.

Put at its simplest, it's a tool that allows creators to map controller buttons to any object or function in the game. It's embodied by a seat – when Sackboy jumps into it, the control scheme switches. So far, so simple. Healey builds a quick and dirty car with a two-way switch on top, in the manner you might in *LBP*. It works, but there's no subtlety to the

Multiplayer matchmaking is now based on the "more powerful idea" of you finding cool levels or creators in your stream and being matched to others looking at the same content



Sackboy will handle more or less identically to the way he did in *LBP*, so original levels remain compatible. "We've made a couple of tiny tweaks but there won't be anything instantly obvious," says Healey. But direct control means you're free to create your own schemes

ART HISTORY

***LBP2*'s story levels will provide both a tutorial for its toolset's capabilities and an out-of-the-box singleplayer experience, much as they did in the original, though now enlivened by the new cutscene functionality. From the little we've seen – the Factory Of A Better Tomorrow – the art looks even more eclectic, combining Constructivism with propaganda art and Futurism.**

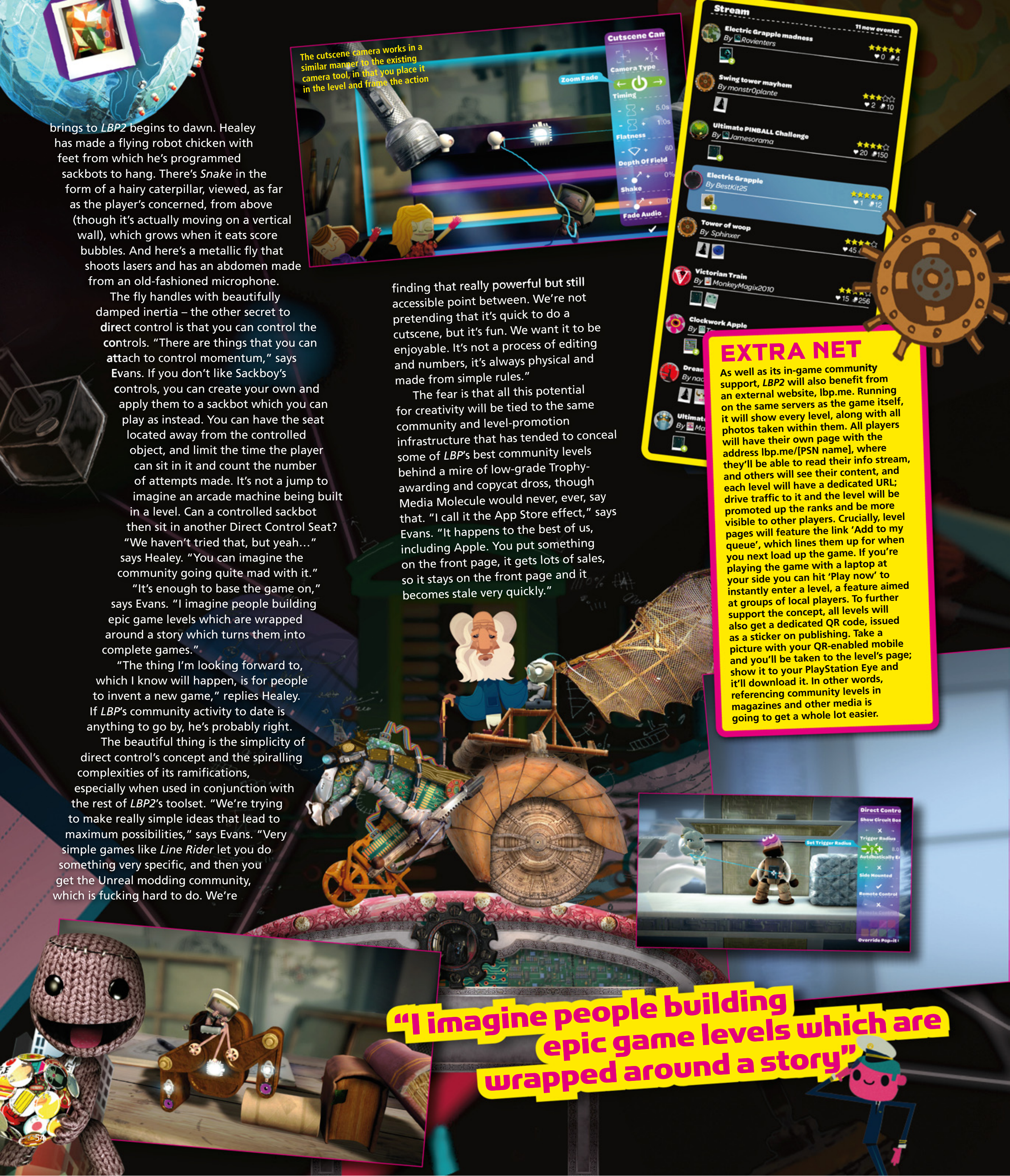
"In the first game we had themes by country," explains Ettouney. "DLC then unleashed so many possibilities, history packs and so on, so what else can we do? We wanted to pick moments from history which were archetypal periods of great creativity – science, art, philosophy – and mashed them up in an *LBP* manner. So you see Victorian steam technology mixed with cake."

With *LBP2*'s new role as a platform for machinima, it's important that the visual assets are flexible. "We want to inspire the community with the content as well as the muscle and the features." And Ettouney's ambitions for it all? "Lady Gaga has her next video in *LBP2*, maybe."

control – it either moves back or forward at a constant rate, and that's it. To prove how easy the Direct Control Seat is to use, he deletes the switch, mounts the seat in its place and opens its microchip. On it is a representation of a DualShock 3. He wires its tilt inputs to the motor on the car's wheel, and there it is: a tilt-controlled car – analogue, of course. He then puts a horn sound effect on the car and wires the circle button to it. But that's just the start.

Healey spawns a sackbot, configures it to use direct control and follow Sackboy, and it suddenly jumps into the car to pursue him. You can wire a sackbot to direct control, too. Or lots of them; some to tilt, others to the thumbsticks, perhaps. And what about two players controlling one sackbot – one the jump and grab, the other its movement? "It allows you to invent your own control mechanisms, essentially," he says as he loads a level of vehicles he's building. "I can now finesse handling. It means you can pretty much make any 2D game you can think of. I've even thought of faking some 3D games."

The scope of what direct control



The cutscene camera works in a similar manner to the existing camera tool, in that you place it in the level and frame the action

brings to *LBP2* begins to dawn. Healey has made a flying robot chicken with feet from which he's programmed sackbots to hang. There's *Snake* in the form of a hairy caterpillar, viewed, as far as the player's concerned, from above (though it's actually moving on a vertical wall), which grows when it eats score bubbles. And here's a metallic fly that shoots lasers and has an abdomen made from an old-fashioned microphone.

The fly handles with beautifully damped inertia – the other secret to direct control is that you can control the controls. "There are things that you can attach to control momentum," says Evans. If you don't like Sackboy's controls, you can create your own and apply them to a sackbot which you can play as instead. You can have the seat located away from the controlled object, and limit the time the player can sit in it and count the number of attempts made. It's not a jump to imagine an arcade machine being built in a level. Can a controlled sackbot then sit in another Direct Control Seat?

"We haven't tried that, but yeah…" says Healey. "You can imagine the community going quite mad with it."

"It's enough to base the game on," says Evans. "I imagine people building epic game levels which are wrapped around a story which turns them into complete games."

"The thing I'm looking forward to, which I know will happen, is for people to invent a new game," replies Healey. If *LBP*'s community activity to date is anything to go by, he's probably right.

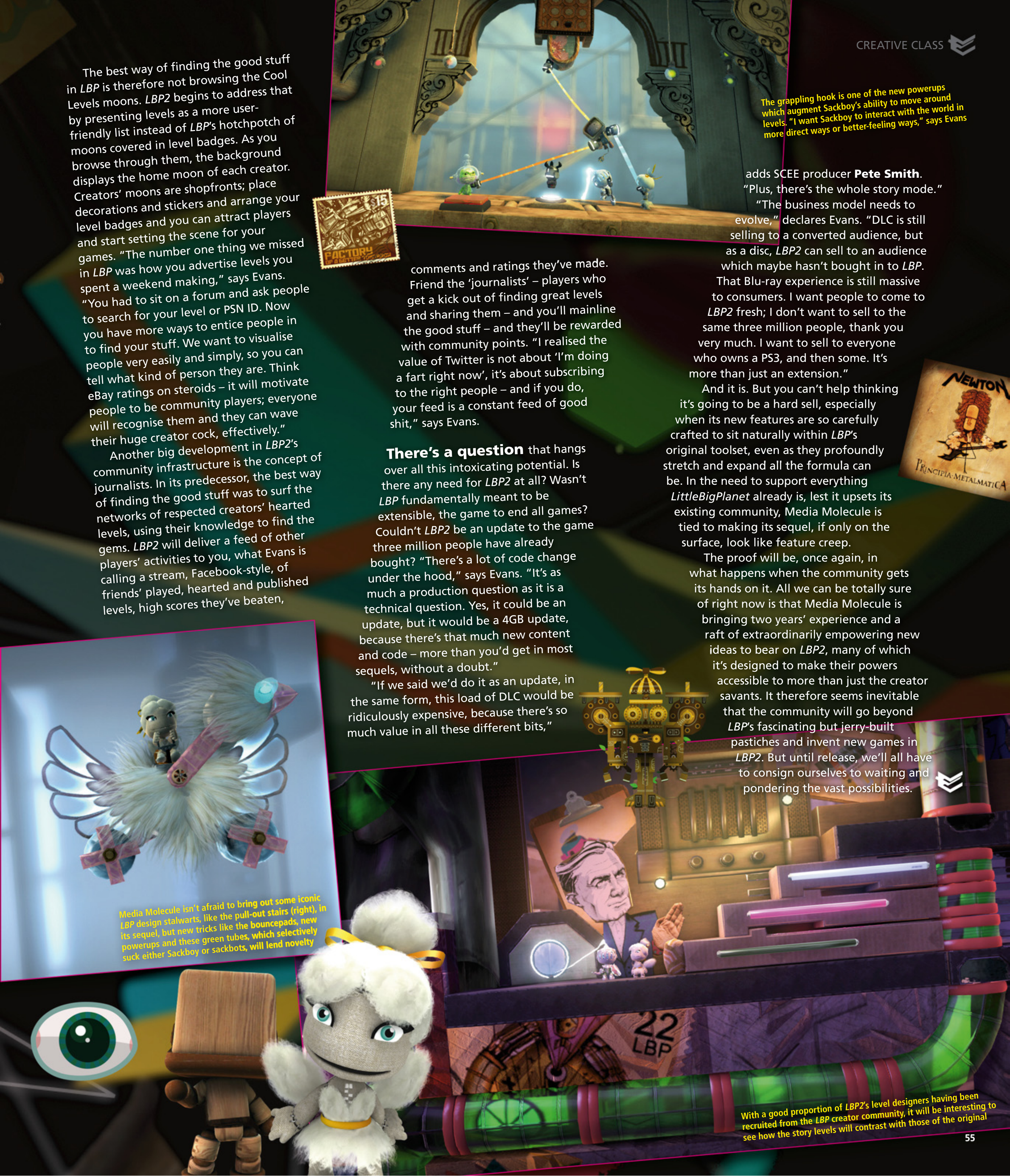
The beautiful thing is the simplicity of direct control's concept and the spiralling complexities of its ramifications, especially when used in conjunction with the rest of *LBP2*'s toolset. "We're trying to make really simple ideas that lead to maximum possibilities," says Evans. "Very simple games like *Line Rider* let you do something very specific, and then you get the Unreal modding community, which is fucking hard to do. We're finding that really powerful but still accessible point between. We're not pretending that it's quick to do a cutscene, but it's fun. We want it to be enjoyable. It's not a process of editing and numbers, it's always physical and made from simple rules."

The fear is that all this potential for creativity will be tied to the same community and level-promotion infrastructure that has tended to conceal some of *LBP*'s best community levels behind a mire of low-grade Trophy-awarding and copycat dross, though Media Molecule would never, ever, say that. "I call it the App Store effect," says Evans. "It happens to the best of us, including Apple. You put something on the front page, it gets lots of sales, so it stays on the front page and it becomes stale very quickly."

EXTRA NET

As well as its in-game community support, *LBP2* will also benefit from an external website, lbp.me. Running on the same servers as the game itself, it will show every level, along with all photos taken within them. All players will have their own page with the address lbp.me/[PSN name], where they'll be able to read their info stream, and others will see their content, and each level will have a dedicated URL; drive traffic to it and the level will be promoted up the ranks and be more visible to other players. Crucially, level pages will feature the link 'Add to my queue', which lines them up for when you next load up the game. If you're playing the game with a laptop at your side you can hit 'Play now' to instantly enter a level, a feature aimed at groups of local players. To further support the concept, all levels will also get a dedicated QR code, issued as a sticker on publishing. Take a picture with your QR-enabled mobile and you'll be taken to the level's page; show it to your PlayStation Eye and it'll download it. In other words, referencing community levels in magazines and other media is going to get a whole lot easier.

"I imagine people building epic game levels which are wrapped around a story"



The best way of finding the good stuff in *LBP* is therefore not browsing the Cool Levels moons. *LBP2* begins to address that by presenting levels as a more user-friendly list instead of *LBP*'s hotchpotch of moons covered in level badges. As you browse through them, the background displays the home moon of each creator. Creators' moons are shopfronts; place decorations and stickers and arrange your level badges and you can attract players and start setting the scene for your games. "The number one thing we missed in *LBP* was how you advertise levels you spent a weekend making," says Evans. "You had to sit on a forum and ask people to search for your level or PSN ID. Now you have more ways to entice people in to find your stuff. We want to visualise people very easily and simply, so you can tell what kind of person they are. Think eBay ratings on steroids – it will motivate people to be community players; everyone will recognise them and they can wave their huge creator cock, effectively."

Another big development in *LBP2*'s community infrastructure is the concept of journalists. In its predecessor, the best way of finding the good stuff was to surf the networks of respected creators' hearted levels, using their knowledge to find the gems. *LBP2* will deliver a feed of other players' activities to you, what Evans is calling a stream, Facebook-style, of friends' played, hearted and published levels, high scores they've beaten, comments and ratings they've made. Friend the 'journalists' – players who get a kick out of finding great levels and sharing them – and you'll mainline the good stuff – and they'll be rewarded with community points. "I realised the value of Twitter is not about 'I'm doing a fart right now', it's about subscribing to the right people – and if you do, your feed is a constant feed of good shit," says Evans.

There's a question that hangs over all this intoxicating potential. Is there any need for *LBP2* at all? Wasn't *LBP* fundamentally meant to be extensible, the game to end all games? Couldn't *LBP2* be an update to the game three million people have already bought? "There's a lot of code change under the hood," says Evans. "It's as much a production question as it is a technical question. Yes, it could be an update, but it would be a 4GB update, because there's that much new content and code – more than you'd get in most sequels, without a doubt."

"If we said we'd do it as an update, in the same form, this load of DLC would be ridiculously expensive, because there's so much value in all these different bits," adds SCEE producer **Pete Smith**. "Plus, there's the whole story mode."

"The business model needs to evolve," declares Evans. "DLC is still selling to a converted audience, but as a disc, *LBP2* can sell to an audience which maybe hasn't bought in to *LBP*. That Blu-ray experience is still massive to consumers. I want people to come to *LBP2* fresh; I don't want to sell to the same three million people, thank you very much. I want to sell to everyone who owns a PS3, and then some. It's more than just an extension."

And it is. But you can't help thinking it's going to be a hard sell, especially when its new features are so carefully crafted to sit naturally within *LBP*'s original toolset, even as they profoundly stretch and expand all the formula can be. In the need to support everything *LittleBigPlanet* already is, lest it upsets its existing community, Media Molecule is tied to making its sequel, if only on the surface, look like feature creep.

The proof will be, once again, in what happens when the community gets its hands on it. All we can be totally sure of right now is that Media Molecule is bringing two years' experience and a raft of extraordinarily empowering new ideas to bear on *LBP2*, many of which it's designed to make their powers accessible to more than just the creator savants. It therefore seems inevitable that the community will go beyond *LBP*'s fascinating but jerry-built pastiches and invent new games in *LBP2*. But until release, we'll all have to consign ourselves to waiting and pondering the vast possibilities.

The grappling hook is one of the new powerups which augment Sackboy's ability to move around levels. "I want Sackboy to interact with the world in more direct ways or better-feeling ways," says Evans

Media Molecule isn't afraid to bring out some iconic *LBP* design stalwarts, like the pull-out stairs (right), in its sequel, but new tricks like the bouncepads, new powerups and these green tubes, which selectively suck either Sackboy or sackbots, will lend novelty

With a good proportion of *LBP2*'s level designers having been recruited from the *LBP* creator community, it will be interesting to see how the story levels will contrast with those of the original


6E55 BRB



GENERATION KILL

THE MAKERS OF PAINKILLER AND GEARS OF WAR LAUNCH A JOINT OFFENSIVE ON THE FIRSTPERSON SHOOTER. AND PIRATES, FOR ONCE, ARE THE GOOD GUYS

Back in August 2008, it wouldn't have taken a genius to figure out what *Bulletstorm* was all about, just a geneticist. The announcement back then? That Epic, renowned arms dealer to the MTV generation and creator of *Gears Of War*, was working on a game with People Can Fly, maker of the nostalgic FPS *Painkiller*. One loves sci-fi, the other prefers fantasy, and neither knows the meaning of a 'quick death'. The last child this preordained was called Damien.

A year earlier, Epic announced its purchase of the Warsaw-based PCF following a successful collaboration on the PC version of *Gears*. Just over a year later, the name *Bulletstorm* emerged from that scrying pool of online gossip, the United States Patent Office. Now we're in Cary, a sprawling, eerily flat region of North Carolina, where the cars in Epic's lot confirm two things: that its gambles with tech and its customer base have paid off, and that it takes good care of its own. This is the same tight-knit family that made DOS-based puzzler *ZZT* some 19 years ago, albeit with several dozen new members since then.

Expansion is such an issue for Epic that it dominates the first hours of our visit, even taking precedence over the game we're here to see. Half of Epic's complex is so new that it resembles a scene from Die Hard, all plywood, duct tape and pots of paint. A gymnasium's going here, we're told, an indoor rock-climbing wall there, a sophisticated QA dungeon in this space and, in that one, a vast data centre for the company's online servers. Most game studios come in departments; this one, with its wall-mounted copies of *Epic Pinball* and *Jazz Jackrabbit*, its catalogue of *Gears* awards and merchandise, and its towering statue of an *Unreal Tournament* space marine, comes in chapters.

Adrian Chmielarz, creative director at PCF, shares the latest of them with Epic's other acquisitions: Chair Entertainment (*Shadow Complex*) and Titan Studios (*Fat Princess*). According to Epic president Mike Capps (interviewed on p64), the Polish studio prefers to line its walls with scantily clad pin-ups that terrify publishers. Beyond any weapon, feature or overlapping DNA, it's this culture clash that makes *Bulletstorm* fascinating.

A 'PULP SCI-FI' ADVENTURE PENNED BY RICK REMENDER, A COMIC-BOOK WRITER KNOWN FOR HIS WORK ON THE PUNISHER, IT PROMISES TO DELIVER ACTION ACROSS A DAZZLING SPECTRUM OF PLANETS AND SITUATIONS

The game tells the story of a mismatched pair of space pirates exiled – by virtue of being outlaws just about everywhere else – to the ass-end of space. A 'pulp sci-fi' adventure penned by Rick Remender, a comic-book writer known for his work on The Punisher and hard-

TITLE: **BULLETSTORM**
FORMAT: **360, PC, PS3**
PUBLISHER: **EA**
DEVELOPER: **PEOPLE CAN FLY, EPIC**
ORIGIN: **POLAND/US**
RELEASE: **2011**





edged escapade Fear Agent, it promises crazy-cool action across a dazzling spectrum of planets and situations. In the words of hero Grayson Hunt, it's "freaks and weirdos around every corner".

Even by Epic's standards, verbiage runs high during this presentation. In this "kick-ass" game full of "creative mayhem" and "water-cooler moments," beams producer **Tanya Jessen**, you have to "kill with skill" to achieve "the circle of awesome," which we gather means a combo of skill-shot bonuses, upgrades and spiralling bloodshed. Whatever these guys had for breakfast, Chmielarz had some too. "You'll see some verbs here you haven't seen in an FPS before," he says, before casting us a sideways glance. "I know, it's corny."

"It's not corny!" booms the good-humoured Jessen, and the tone of the day is set.

The story begins with Hunt and his partner, the cyborg Ishi Sato, landing on the rooftops of a bustling megalopolis. A member of the covert hit squad Dead Echo, Hunt is under orders to kill a ruthless and powerful alleged war criminal. Doubt hangs over the man's guilt, though, to the extent that Hunt refuses the cruel order. His boss, the charismatic General Victor Sarrano, is apoplectic, and the pair go on the run from almost certain death.

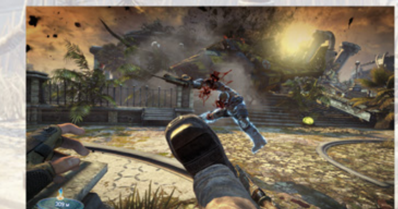
However noble their predicament, life on the wrong side of the law takes its toll. By the time the game proper begins, Hunt is a debaucherous rogue and Sato is "clinging to humanity". Not the best mindsets, perhaps, for an unexpected reunion with their psychotic pursuer. Finding Sarrano's flagship in orbit around the verdant planet Stygia, Hunt sets their own, the Spectre, on a collision course. Crippled, they spiral together towards the surface, into a world in which the least of their problems is each other.

Throughout the afternoon, Epic's pitch is so effusive that it feels doubly awkward mentioning that 'pulp', when used in the context of videogames, often means simply 'lowbrow' (not quite the word we used). Chmielarz is unfazed. "It's a couple of things. One is visuals: you take the covers of these magazines and comic books of the '30s and '40s – obviously very colourful with a lot of oranges, blues, greens. We have that. But the other thing about pulp, to me, is that it's often just a ride. So, a guy jumps from a plane and it doesn't really matter how he lands.

"It's like those fuel cells in Star Trek… What are they called again?" No idea, we lie, the words 'dilithium crystals' drowning out our thoughts. "Rick's take is that no one really gives a shit about how that spaceship's engine really works – we warp out to the shittiest corner of the universe and that's it. It doesn't matter how vehicles work in a city of the future but it's fun when they try and run you over."

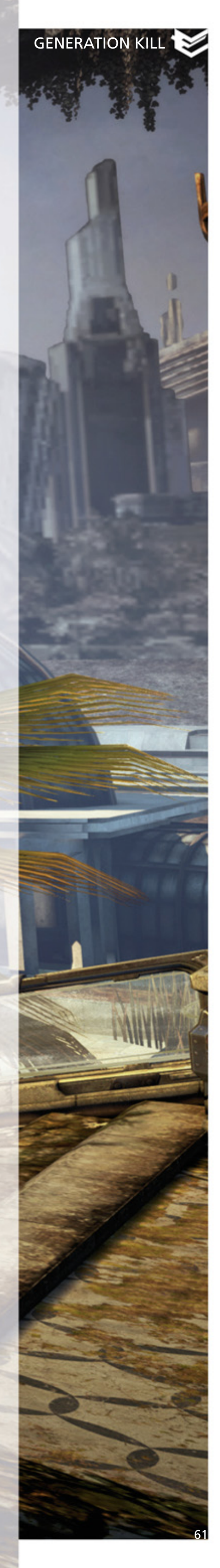
Bulletstorm, he explains, is a kind of 'modern

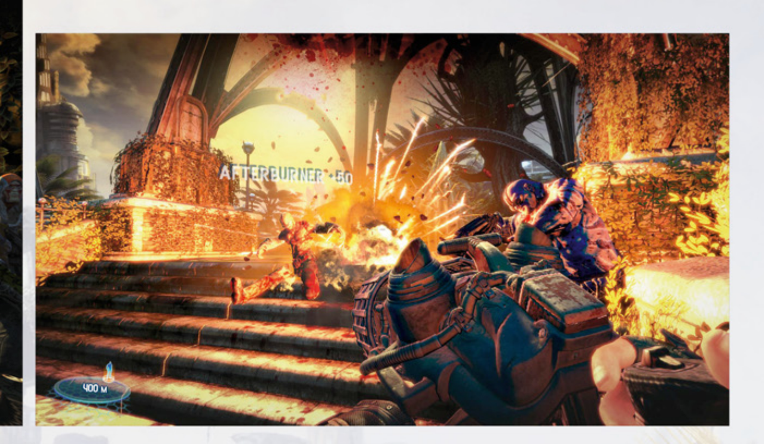
"THERE'S NO PSYCHOLOGY IN JAMES BOND, NO CHARACTER ARC WHATSOEVER – BUT IN OUR CASE, YOU BEGIN AS ONE MAN AND FINISH THE GAME A DIFFERENT ONE. IT'S A BIT MORE LOGICAL"





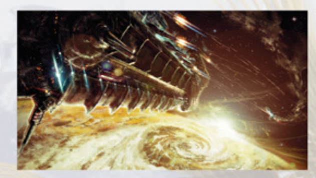
Bleszinski isn't blind to the perils of the scripted sequence, preferring a robust and versatile 'core loop' like the one pictured here. *Gears Of War 2*, he admits, was caught "masturbating" at times, even robbing players of gratifying major kills. There's evidence of similar in this game's demo, specifically a helicopter battle cut short by the hostile terrain





pulp' in which the old Raymond Chandler types suffer seedier, updated vices. "There's this great guy called Steve Niles [author of 30 Days Of Night, among others], and he has a character called Cal McDonald. He's very pulpy, very hard crime fiction. Most detectives are drinking, this one's doing heroin. So it feels new, and that's what we're trying to do. It's a little bit more logical. There's no psychology in James Bond, no character arc whatsoever – but in our case, you begin as one man and finish the game a different one."

Suddenly, this all sounds a bit too heavy for a game about shooting and booting enemies in the nuts, preferably into the range of giant Venus fly traps and volatile Incinerator Bins, and ideally as part of a grisly high-scoring combo. Four hours into the game, our demo starts as Hunt, Sato and a spunky unnamed chick exit a subway into Elysium, Stygia's abandoned tourist paradise. It's a stunning place, every bit as cheery as Chmielarz promised, yet clearly evacuated for good reason. "Remember how *Gears Of War* had this thing about 'destroyed beauty'?" he says. "This is 'paradise defiled'." We daren't ask the difference.



POLES APART

Asked if Epic hopes to protect any regional flavour in People Can Fly's games, as opposed to stamping its own on them, Jessen sees things a little differently. "The thing that's important for us is maintaining the PCF flavour," he says. "I wouldn't necessarily say Polish or European because CD Projekt had *The Witcher*, and while that had its own sensibility I wouldn't say it's a regional one. But with PCF, in particular, they bring an insane, over-the-top sensibility. They pitch us an idea and we say: 'What? That's madness!' Then they send us a prototype and we're like: '… and it's awesome!' We do want to make sure that comes through in the game, because there are so few small developers who bring it any more."

As environmental reveals go, what's interesting about this one is that it's not the architecture nor terrain that hit you first, but Lightmass, the global illumination system recently added to Unreal Engine 3. When it's released early next year, *Bulletstorm* will be one of the first games to use it on this scale, making it a UE3 game like none you've seen before. Evoking screenshots of id Software's *Rage*, Lightmass bathes such urban environments in neutral and natural tones which let a game's art assets shine. *Bulletstorm*'s are totally worthy, from the holographic mailboxes and billboards to its scuffed tarmac, rippling tarpaulins and stepped aluminium spires.

Another thing to note before a shot's fired is a certain nervous energy to the bob and weave of Hunt's FOV. His aggression, it says, is barely containable, bordering on frenzy. His Peace Maker Carbine explores the entire bottom quarter of the screen as he idles. With no audio logs and "just a couple of breather sections," says Chmielarz, the game aspires to "complete adventure". These few seconds of downtime, then, are just enough to respect the game's scenic narrative – Elysium's demise is written in placards, evacuation notices and carefully placed debris – and meet the second deadliest weapon in Hunt's basic arsenal, his foot.

The battle for Stygia is being lost, it seems, by a marauding tribe of punks called The Skulls. Invading every inch of their turf is a giant man-eating plant – a single underground organism with a topside army of barbs, vines, tongues and maws. Bringing to mind *Dark Messiah Of Might & Magic*, each of these is a potential skewer for Hunt and Sato's enemies, who in the demo come lumbering into action firing insults before bullets.

Together with Epic's design director and mouthpiece **Cliff Bleszinski**, Jessen and Chmielarz speak often of the game's core loop, which by all accounts has taken about a year of international back-and-forth to perfect. *Bulletstorm* was a thirdperson game before



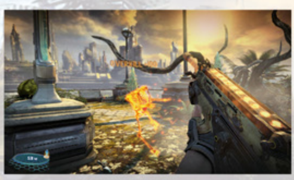


Chmielarz "played a couple of firstperson shooters in a row and realised I felt more immersed," and, true to those origins, deals heavily in schadenfreude. The longer, nastier and more creative a kill, the greater the score.

The first of Hunt's victims gets it in the shins, a sliding tackle knocking him into slow-mo before a burst from the carbine finishes it off. You could call it a mercy killing, but the game's got one already: double-tap them in the groin and face (100 points). Kicking them into a cactus is another option ('Bad Touch', 50 points), or into the sticky tongue of a Man Eater plant ('Environmental', 50 points). Incinerator Bins are the game's exploding crates, easily tossed using an electric whip called the Leash. The Flail Gun, meanwhile, wraps the target in an explosive-tipped chain before, if you stage it right, you punt them into their friends ('Gang Bang', 50 points). Two kills in a row and it's 'Heat Wave' (100 points); three and it's the '4th Of July' for a further 100. We'll leave you to guess what 'Fertiliser' involves.

By making only a partial transition to firstperson (beyond the obvious POV), *Bulletstorm* boasts an unusually prominent hero for an FPS, bringing it into line with games like *The Chronicles Of Riddick* series, *Prey* and, suggests Chmielarz, *Duke Nukem 3D*. What separates this game from those is the near-constant presence of a verbal sparring partner, which fills the game with dialogue and gives all of Hunt's many -isms their time in the spotlight: chauvinism, egotism, racism (assuming cyborgs count) and sadism – and that's just the demo.

"That crafty metal bastard's sending a signal!" he barks as a tracking blip appears on the Leash, guiding him and his game female companion through a screen-spanning firefight which culminates, *Gears* style, in the arrival of a chunky helicopter gunship. This one, though, is dragged to a fiery grave by weeds which lash up from the ground. "Man Eaters' tongues are strong enough to bring down a helicopter," cries Hunt. "You two might be related." Moments later, a wandering grunt is sucked violently into nearby foliage.



POWER STRUGGLE

Avoiding 'weapon overkill' was a big thing for *Painkiller* (reviewed way back in E137), each fire mode serving an exact purpose. *Bulletstorm* is no different, and Chmielarz takes the distribution of power seriously. We ask him about the arguably overpowered *Crysis*, but this raises an unlikely issue. "I just don't play PC," he admits. "I want to lay down in my bed, surround speakers on, gamepad in my hand. So I saw it for five minutes to be struck by the visuals, but didn't play it." Hence *Painkiller*'s laboured move to Xbox? "No, that was just a publisher thing… and a pain in the arse. We were doing it when Xbox was in decline, and it probably wasn't even released in Europe [it was, in 2006, as *Painkiller: Hell Wars*]. A lot of people wrote to me trying to buy it on eBay."

"They love tight spaces," says the sassy sidekick. Hunt: "I'm not even touching that one."

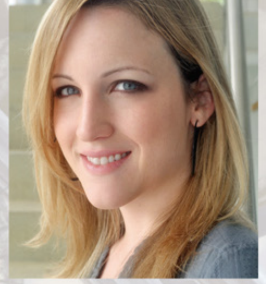
The showdown with the cyborg-guzzling boss – which all but cries "Feed me, Seymour!" as it thrashes around – spills from a large and ornate greenhouse to a piazza backed by a luscious skybox. Despite mutant plant fatigue brought on by *Resident Evil 4* and *Batman: Arkham Asylum*, we have to admit that this one's about as good as they get – agile, anthropomorphic and fun to watch. Bullets keep it at bay as it climbs the walls and ceiling on writhing roots, the Leash then wrenching fluorescent sacks from its belly, leaving it vulnerable. Hunt: "Nuke those tentacles!" The reply: "You did say 'tentacles', right?"

Recalling the fuss made over *Painkiller*'s 8,000-polygon, Havok-wielding boss battles, we ask Chmielarz if such things have a place in modern games. His answer: "They don't. We want to start slow with the marketing campaign so we showed you this, but I'm way more interested in those blockbuster moments. One of the best is the atomic bomb going off in *COD4* – not a boss battle but just awesome. *Bulletstorm*'s more about crazy events like the train ride in *Uncharted 2*."



Problems rendering naturalistic trees haven't stopped UE3 games making inevitable trips to 'the arboretum level' – just ask *BioShock*, *Batman: Arkham Asylum* or *Mass Effect 2* DLC. Upgrades to the tech, though, make this one worthwhile





Adrian Chmielarz (left) is creative director at People Can Fly. Cliff Bleszinski is Epic's design director and a leading light in the *Unreal* and *Gears* series. Tanya Jessen, whose CV features the likes of *Gears 2* and *Unreal Tournament III*, is *Bulletstorm*'s producer at Epic

Its weapons, meanwhile, are only going to get bigger. No one's saying crossbows with wooden stakes and shuriken-firing Tesla guns yet, but wrapping up the demo is one carbine upgrade that charges and fires 100 bullets at once. And, yes, they're taken from your ammo stock. "Adrian [Chmielarz] calls me and is like: 'I've got this idea for a weapon and it's gonna be awesome'," says Jessen. "Then he sends a build and we start the iteration process, and I'll grab Cliff and we sit down and play the prototype over and over again, come up with some cool ideas and pitch them to PCF, and they'll pick one they think is great, build it and send it back. You're never going to hit exactly what you want the first time, so you want to fail fast, move on quickly and improve."

Both these studios preach the gospel of iteration more than even Infinity Ward, a luxury they credit to Unreal Engine 3. "The fact we have the engine is part of *Bulletstorm*'s success," says Chmielarz. "If you go with your own engine from scratch, or when it's still immature, it's a real waste of resources. But, after *Gears*, we pretty much knew things like how many bodies we could have and the technology behind it. If there was an idea, the next day we could test it. We do tons of iterations and we're thankful for Epic's done-when-it's-done philosophy."

In return, you suspect, Epic's getting something just as useful for its own games: a lesson in lightening up. The *Gears* games, after all, remain torn between delightful absurdity and disastrous attempts at pathos. As we catch him in something of a Colonel Kurtz moment in his hushed and darkened office, Bleszinski is as candid as ever. "If you look at these characters, they're more Han Solo than they are space marine, which for us is a step in a cool new direction.

"I hope I'll be able to work someday on a game that has absolutely no space marine characters in it. That'd be great. Somewhere down the line I hope to work on something people will look at and say: 'That's an Epic game? No way'. That's a way off, but it's what I'd love to do eventually."

For now, though, he's relishing the thought of a showdown with *Bulletstorm*'s potential adversaries, the score-based *Bodycount* and *Brink*, both of which should be out already come the game's 2011 release. Is the comparison too crude? "The human mind's wired to see patterns," Bleszinski says. "Hollywood always moves in patterns with shark movies, zombie movies or vampire films – don't get me started on those. Everyone loves a challenge, they love competition. So, bring it. With *Gears*, they brought *Resistance* and *Killzone*, and I think *Gears* held its own. We're going to make this game kick-ass, and the consumers win, man."

"I HOPE I'LL BE ABLE TO WORK SOMEDAY ON A GAME THAT HAS ABSOLUTELY NO SPACE MARINE CHARACTERS IN IT. THAT'D BE GREAT. THAT'S A WAY OFF, BUT I'D LOVE TO DO IT EVENTUALLY"

LORD OF WAR

AS UNREAL ENGINE 4 PREPARES FOR BATTLE, EPIC'S PRESIDENT HOLDS FORTH ON COMPETITION, STRATEGIES AND MANOEUVRES



Epic might move with singular focus when it comes to crowd-pleasing action games, but good luck finding a more disparate pair of leaders than president **Mike Capps** and vice president Mark Rein. Apparently preferring the day-to-day worries of the expanding Epic network to the engine-licensing campaign trail, Capps wears the kid gloves to Rein's knuckledusters. So, armed with questions about piracy, family values and CryEngine 3, let's see what makes him take them off.

Do you expect the same kind of dominance with Unreal Engine 4 as its predecessor?
Are you kidding? More and better dominance! Unreal Engine 3's done remarkably well this generation, and I think that was a mix of us making an educated guess about where the tech was going to be on consoles, and the shift to console happening at the same time. So we had a DX9 engine just when everyone had been crunching madly on their last Xbox or PS2 game, and they look up and go: "Oh, jeez, it's actually a big leap". They needed us, which was perfect. And of course RenderWare dropped out of the equation, so thanks very much to EA.

Looking at the next generation, it's really murky compared to last time. I'm sure you've heard just as many rumours about when it's going to happen, and they all get overturned every year. Three more months, I always think, until I'm going to know for sure what the platform is – and I think I could find you an email from three years ago saying just that. So we're all a little nervous. But if you look at what's happening in the PC market – Larrabee and all that – it's really taking off, and I think the jump to next generation's going to be another really big one, which is great for tech guys. Most likely, you're not going to want to make that massive investment yourself, you're going to look to come to a company like Epic. That's our hope, to be ahead of the game. And it's certainly a struggle for us to have great-looking games at the end of a console cycle and still be totally ready for the next one.

How about CryEngine 3?
Honestly, I've got a lot of respect for those guys; I know many people who work there – and I've hired a few. But it's difficult for us to know what their position is. They've positioned themselves strongly as the 'we're gonna be on console, push one button and it's great on all three platforms' engine. *Warhead* was going to come out in 2008 and was going to be their first big console game, and then they just cut console development from CryEngine 2 entirely, and suddenly we had a new engine. So, they've yet to ship an Xbox 360 game and we're five years in. It surprises me that people take them seriously as a crossplatform engine company. We don't know how to compete against a company that hasn't shipped yet. It's all potential, so we'll see.

***Gears Of War* was used by the US Army at tournaments designed as recruitment fairs. What's your stance on that?**
I don't know if you can see the top-right picture on the wall there, but that's for *America's Army*, which I of course designed. And there's me on an army base. That game was very much aimed at a 17-and-up audience and we knew it, right? We were aiming at recruitable Americans – that was the goal. And the secondary goal was to get people thinking, 'Gosh, the Army isn't a bunch of losers. This is kinda cool'. At the time, that was the first Unreal Engine 2 game, so it was pretty cool tech and the game was kind of fun. Just that alone was of huge value. It's like when they advertise on Monday Night Wrestling or whatever. I don't know about the situation you mentioned. *Gears* was a pretty safe one for them because it's a mature game and you have to be over 17 to buy it in the stores – not by law but by common practice among retailers. It's actually kind of tough for us because our guys wanna go and talk in secondary schools about what they do at work, and say you should be a computer game developer someday. But we stay away from that. We try to stay out of high schools and such because we don't want anyone saying, "A-ha! You're bringing violent videogames into our high school". No, I just want to help them get a job. But it's very dicey.

Dealing with *Bulletstorm* was a totally different process, because I walked into their office the first time and there's nudie pictures up on the walls everywhere. Right next to the female secretary there's a pin-up, and I'm like, "If Microsoft or EA come to visit for a publisher demo, I dunno, this might not work". So I guess we're just as bad pushing our American morality on them.

"I THINK THE JUMP TO NEXT GENERATION'S GOING TO BE ANOTHER BIG ONE. IT'S A STRUGGLE FOR US TO HAVE GREAT GAMES AT THE END OF A CONSOLE CYCLE AND STILL BE READY FOR THE NEXT"

What can you talk about regarding Epic's involvement with Natal?
You may not be aware, but some of the very first demos that were done with the platform all used Unreal Engine. Microsoft's been using our tech for their projects from the very beginning, so they know it really well. I recently had an engineer who wanted to move off to Seattle – he was actually the lead programmer on *Gears* – and he's out there now working on those kinds of projects. So they've got a really strong UE3 programmer working on Natal stuff.

We've got a lot of interest in the platform, for sure. We're all playing wait-and-see a little bit, just like with any peripheral, but it's clear Microsoft's taking it really, really seriously. Being there early with the tech and making sure it's really easy for companies who are thinking about Natal to be using our tech – it's obvious.

Are you torn in any way between what Microsoft's doing and PlayStation Move?
We're arms dealers, right, and I hope it's a really good war. We'd be foolish to ignore Move support; if nothing else, it's a competitive bullet







Mike Capps (left) is committed to growing Epic's scope. That has obviously meant acquisitions, and in 2011 *Bulletstorm* will be a bold illustration of its ambition. These frames of animation hint at the game's combat, but they show little of its screen-swallowing battles

for the engine when people are making licensing decisions. I know a few teams who are working on Natal projects to show at E3 and building in Move support, so I know it's happening. We're not making comments about our own games, but of course we're actively working on it.

How about 3DTV?

I have 5.1 at home now because they had it in the theatre and I loved it. And how long did it take before we had THX? We're probably looking at the same adoption curve, so it'll actually take a while. Every new TV's going to be supporting HDMI 1.4, and that'll happen in no time – but how long before everyone's got one? I can't quote the precise numbers, but a shockingly large percentage of *Gears 2* players did not have HD support. That's three years into this console cycle. I think it'll be the same thing [for 3D]: we'll get some very rapid early adopters but it'll be a long time before everyone throws away their old television set.

It's fantastic, though. We showed a bunch of stereoscopic demos at GDC using RealD and Nvidia stuff, and it looks great. It makes it such a better experience. The big thing is that – unless you're cheating – it's costing you frames, so that's always gonna hurt you a little bit. But the benefits for immersion are so great. A lot of the tech right now's also rather tiring on the eyes.

Studios are becoming larger and more international. Will you fight to preserve Epic's tight-knit family values?

It's not an easy answer. It's tough to balance the needs of a franchise like *Gears Of War*: what the marketplace expects, and just how much bigger a sequel needs to be to be perceived as good as the first one – it's gotta be twice as long and then it's nearly long enough. What's been successful here has always been a really strong feeling of culture. All the money that comes into our studio goes to our employees, so we're all very invested in the success of each product. And it all goes in one big pool, so everyone's incentivised to help each other. We all want *Bulletstorm* to be a big win, and so the engine guys are going to be crunching to make sure *Bulletstorm* on PS3 is bad-ass. That's our job.

You want people with you in that kind of environment you can count on – and I can only find brilliant people I can count on so fast. I've been hiring at the same rate for about the last seven or eight years now, which is about ten new guys a year. We don't lose many people at Epic – maybe one or two a year – so there you go. The acquisitions have been really interesting. We got Chair Entertainment and People Can Fly right around the same time – and those companies both had their own cultures which are different from ours, but are focused on making a great game and making it fun. These are quality-focused guys, but the cultures are different enough that we always have differences of opinion. But maintaining 'what is Epic' when going from 20 guys – which is what it was when I started – to 450 in five countries is rough. Every day, it's what I think about the most. I work with my HR director more than anyone else in the company.

What's your take on piracy and DRM on PC?

Piracy's already had its impact. If you walked in to this place six years ago, Epic was a PC company and always had been. We did one PS2 launch title, which was a port of *Unreal Tournament*, and everything else was PC. And now, if you read our forums, people are saying: 'Why do you hate the PC? You're a console-only company'. And guess what? It's because the money's on console.

We still do PC, we still love the PC, but we already saw the impact of piracy: it killed a lot of great independent developers and completely changed our business model. But there's certainly a light for PC gaming. The biggest game of all now is *Farmville*, right? Free to play with micropayments is not just working in Asia but in the western market. So, most publishers I'm speaking to right now think their money's going to be shifting back to PC and away from traditional consoles, just because folks are in that mode of wanting to spend a little bit of time every now and then, and paying money to save time because there's so much media competing for it.

I read a great article about Dungeons & Dragons which said: 'Imagine, 20 years ago, your ten-year-old kid buying a box of books. You tore those books apart, you were so fascinated to read all the rules and stuff. If you bought a game, you read every page of the manual'. Why D&D has changed is because kids don't read the rules any more. I sure did when I was ten. So when you have that sort of change in the way people consume media, it makes sense that we're moving away from the ten-hour blockbuster to those always-persistent bits of play.

So, maybe Facebook will save PC gaming – but it's not going to look like *Gears Of War*.

And do you find that people are frightened by that metamorphosis?

Yeah, you're not going to be playing *Baldur's Gate*. It's just not going to be that way. It'll be a free-to-play, buy-your-potions-for-five-cents-online version, with user-created content [laughs]. Our children will never know what they've lost. We're certainly not dooming-and-glooming over here. Piracy hurt, subscription is the answer. Used game sales are really, really hurting console – how many players never paid us for *Gears*? – and the response to that is that people are putting more and more into DLC, retail-only download codes and those kinds of thing. And it makes sense. *Dragon Age* is a good example, focusing efforts on the people who paid for it.


7
www.pegi.info
PS3
THE GAME IS JUST THE START
Start imagining...well, anything! Create your character and your kart and start racing on thousands of tracks made by players around the world. In fact, why not create a gravity-defying, missile-flying racetrack of your own?
modnation.com
PlayStation®
"PlayStation", "PLAYSTATION", "PS3" and "△○✕□" are registered trademarks of Sony Computer Entertainment Inc. "SONY" and are registered trademarks of Sony Corporation. "make.believe" is a trademark of the same company. "Blu-ray Disc" and "BD" are trademarks. ModNation PSP: "ModNation™ Racers ©2010 Sony Computer Entertainment America. Published by Sony Computer Entertainment Europe. Developed by San Diego Studio. ModNation PS3: "ModNation™ Racers ©2010 Sony Computer Entertainment America. Published by Sony Computer Entertainment Europe. Developed by United Front Games. "ModNation" is a trademark of Sony Computer Entertainment Europe. All Rights Reserved. *Broadband internet service required. Users are responsible for broadband access fees. Charges apply for some content. PlayStation®Network and PlayStation®Store subject to terms of use and not available in all countries and languages. Users under 18 require parental consent.


ModNation RACERS™
TAKE YOUR IMAGINATION FOR A SPIN
DRILLBIT
PSP
PS3
ModNation RACERS
ModNation RACERS

An audience with...

John Smedley

The man behind EverQuest talks online addiction, social fabrics and plans to make the best MMOG in the world

You haven't really made a *big* impression in games until you've been implicated in someone's death. Don't shoot the messenger: that's just how it works. Look at the Houser brothers, the two Johns of id Software, or **John Smedley**: all giants in their respective fields, and all, if tabloid rags are to be believed, responsible for the loss of human life. In Smedley's case it was a suicide: that of 21-year-old Wisconsonian Shawn Woolley, whose 24/7 obsession with Smedley's game, *EverQuest*, led to complete seclusion from the outside world and, some suggest, his decision to shoot himself while playing the game. Since then, Woolley's mother has promoted awareness about so-called videogame addiction, and numerous articles have been written about the insidious ability of '*EverCrack*' to drive its players to isolation and death. Despite this, *EverQuest* only became stronger, leaving its former rival, *Ultima Online*, in the dust. And since then, it's spawned a sequel and inspired an entire genre – or, at least, the dominant variation thereof. We talk to Smedley, the man who started it all, about the road to glory and what lies beyond *World Of Warcraft*.

How did you get your start in this industry?
Well, I began my career in this phase in 1987, or perhaps early '88. I started out as a programmer, and I was making Apple II games, having a great time, and then I started my own company – because I'd been a contractor previously – and started getting work. Then I sold my company, and ended up working at Sony in December '93. I've been here ever since.

The company began its life as 989 Studios, right?
Yes. We worked under the 989 name until January '99, all the way through *EverQuest*'s development. But then my old boss, Kelly Fox, wanted to spin us out as a separate company, because we weren't really doing PlayStation games. So we started our own company, Verant, launched *EverQuest* under the Verant name, but another division of Sony – Sony Online Entertainment – still owned a piece of us. So, in May 2000, we sold the rest of the company to SOE, and became part of that.

> "We designed a dragon to be taken down by 20 or 25 players. Then 40 or 50 people figured that out, and came in and killed it instantly"

How did the design for *EverQuest* originate? Was it inspired by the news about *Ultima Online*?
Not originally, actually. But definitely, I mean, once the beta came out and *UO* launched, we were all playing the heck out of it. Personally I loved the game, and still do. And so, sure, we couldn't help but be inspired by what we saw and what we played. But we really did want to make a very different game, so we stuck with what we were already making.

***Ultima Online*'s designer, Raph Koster, once suggested that *EverQuest* had a strong heritage in DikuMUD games. Do you agree?**
Well, the influence from DikuMUDs was there, but really it was more inspired by playing Dungeons & Dragons than anything. The desire to make a fantasy world came from a lot of D&D playing. Having said that, a lot of people we brought into the company – Brad McQuaid, for instance – were heavily into MUDs.

Did you make an effort to differentiate yourself from Origin's game?
That's what's funny. It didn't affect our design at all, but it ended up being different anyway. *Ultima Online* was very player-versus-player-centric, and we saw, right away, that some people found that very frustrating. So we knew that wasn't the main way we wanted to go. We wanted to stick with what we had in mind, which was a player-versus-environment game. Look, personally, I absolutely loved the player-versus-player aspect of *Ultima Online*, but we could certainly see that there was a growing market for something different.

Did you have any indication that the market was as big as it ultimately revealed itself to be?
We had no idea! We never knew it would be this big. And it's still profitable. When I look at it now, it's amazing: I've got a 14-year-old son, and he lives in a world where people don't play Dungeons & Dragons. They play MMOGs. MMOGs, in a way, are like this generation's version of D&D.

Were you prepared for the mass influx of players? *EQ*, after all, had already accrued more subscribers than *Ultima Online* by the end of its first year on shelves.
Well, that taught us, for one, the power of force multipliers. We had designed, say, a dragon to be taken down by a certain number of players – let's say around 20 or 25. The first thing that happened was that 40 or 50 people figured that out, and came in and killed it instantly. The players were a lot smarter than we were. We'd design it in our heads with a certain set of expectations, and immediately they'd come in and min-max the whole situation. So we beefed up those dragons – the next time they came to



John Smedley has recently overseen a huge MMO success in the form of SOE's *Free Realms*. His next big challenge will be the launch of *DC Universe Online*, due later this year

see it, it would randomly select somebody and shoot a death-beam at them, and kill them instantly!

Did you sense, in those early days, that the market was about to become a hotly contested one?
We knew the competition was coming. *World Of Warcraft* was coming. We had no idea how big it would be, certainly, but we always had our own path to follow. We knew it was never going to just be *EverQuest* for us – our goal was to make different MMOs in completely different genres. To give you a good idea, we had *EverQuest*, we put out *Star Wars Galaxies* soon after that, then we had *PlanetSide*, which was a shooter. And we also had a game called *Sovereign*, which was an MMO strategy game. It never saw the light of day. Why? Well, it just never got fun enough for us. I regret not ploughing on with it, though. We could've found the magic.

Is that something you plan to do?
No. I mean, we never rule it out, but we've got other things that are more interesting to us right now. And at some point when you lose momentum behind a project, it's very hard to get it started again. We've got some cool tricks up our sleeve, though. We're definitely not walking away from doing games in other genres. We haven't announced some of them, but some of them are literally launching within weeks.

You've mentioned a strong desire to move into the field of console MMOGs, but your first attempt, *EverQuest Online Adventures*, didn't do particularly well.
It was ahead of its time. I say that because there was only us and *Final Fantasy XI*, and that's it for console MMOGs up to today. You can talk about *Phantasy Star*, but that wasn't really an MMOG. Really, that's the only two to date. And we launched right when the network adapter did for the PS2. So, I think if we'd launched a year later, we would've done substantially better, and we didn't. It did OK. It didn't light the world on fire, but it was a solid product for us, and we're still supporting it today.

Why was that?
Look, I believe we shouldn't have started *EverQuest II* when we did. But we had no idea how long the original *EverQuest* was going to go on for. The videogame industry had never had a game with these kind of legs before, and so we thought it would last a year or two, maximum. And we're at 11 years and counting now. It's easy to say it was a mistake now with the benefit of hindsight, but I wish we could have had that one back. We probably would've done it differently – we still would have made the game, but we just wouldn't have called it *EverQuest II*.

"People don't realise it, but EverQuest was the second 3D-card-only game ever made, ever released. It was a big decision to do that"

Are there any moments in your history at SOE that you regret?
Hmm. Probably, I think, there are a couple of times we didn't listen to our users enough. In *Star Wars Galaxies*, we didn't listen to our userbase enough, and made a big change to the game. The NGE is what we called it, and I think that was probably the biggest lesson learned for our company. Other than that, honestly, it's maybe calling *EverQuest II EverQuest II*.

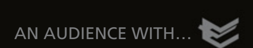
Some have suggested that another SOE game, *Vanguard: Saga Of Heroes*, is a truer sequel to *EverQuest* than *EverQuest II*.
Well, that's interesting, because it didn't really serve the *EQ* market. It served a somewhat harder-core base, and the game was designed for people who really did have more time on their hands. It was designed for a hardcore audience. We thought some of our games were going a little lighter, so *Vanguard* was going to fit in with the hardcore side. But it was different enough from the *EQ* universe that we felt it could live on its own. And it has.

In your experience, what is the strongest contributing factor to any given online game's longevity?
The social fabric. If the game is great, I mean – otherwise it won't last anyway. But for an MMOG to last, the social fabric has to be there. When *World Of Warcraft* launched, they very quickly outdid us. The reason for that was partly their game, but also partly the fact that *EverQuest* was almost five years old at the time, and a lot of the guilds decided to go try *WOW*. So when you get social momentum behind a game, that's where you start getting the bigger acceptance, and the broader market emerges from there. Otherwise, you get a network of these smaller MMOGs that have their own userbases, but never hit really big.

If you look at the success of *WOW*, as well as your recent free-to-play game *Free Realms*, it seems that relatively low system requirements are important, too.
That's something *WOW* proved to the entire market. It's interesting, because when *EverQuest* was released – people don't realise it – but it



***EverQuest* has had 16 expansion packs since its 1999 release, the most recent, Underfoot, appearing in December 2009. While there have been improvements in graphics and gameplay in that time, one server for the Mac edition still exists using models and rules frozen in 2002**



EverQuest II allows a choice from 19 races when creating a character, from barbarians and ogres to four kinds of elf

was the second 3D-card-only game ever made, ever released, period. It was a big decision to do that. So, with *EQII*, our first goal was to make this beautiful game. We didn't think about system specs enough. We were already too far down that road when *WOW* came around, and we didn't see the market for what it was at the time. But now, that's something we're focused on. And our next round of games has taken that into consideration in every way. A good example is *Free Realms*, as you said, which we launched about ten months ago. It has incredibly low system requirements. You can play it on just about anything out there. And with *Free Realms* we've hit the masses, and now we're using that low-spec formula for our other games.

Does this tie in to the major strategic shift in the company that you outlined several months ago?
Yes. We're learning from the things we've done in the past and building upon them. So, what we're trying to do now is broaden the potential userbase who can play our games, and perhaps not be as hardcore as we once were. That doesn't mean dumbing them down; it just means they work on a wider cross-section of systems, say. It means we're focused on making it more accessible, so people don't feel like they have to spend a lot of time in the game to get a lot of fun out of it. And we're also going into new genres, as with *Free Realms* where we went after a younger audience. And we're nearly at nine million registered users in that game. It's going up very fast. It proves that if you go out and make a great game like *Free Realms*, you can really open the game up to a lot of people.

But what about the more hobbyist side of the company? Do you intend to take on *World Of Warcraft* with another, shall we say, *EverQuest*-like MMOG?
World Of Warcraft is a direct competitor to us, and we intend to be on top. We're not resting on our laurels. We've got some great new stuff coming out, and you know what? We're going to be the world's best online gaming company, and we've got the stuff to prove it.

Finally, a controversial question. Ever since Shawn Woolley's suicide while playing *EverQuest*, many media outlets have suggested that MMOGs are designed to ensnare young people into the 'depths of addiction'. How do you respond?
It's silly. I mean, we make games. We make games to play and have fun. It's up to them how much they want to play. I'm sure that James Cameron didn't envisage people going to see Avatar 50 times in a row and spending every waking minute thinking about it.



48 HOUR PARTY PEOPLE

A NEW GENERATION OF CODERS AND DESIGNERS IS CUTTING ITS TEETH IN THE PRESSURISED WORLD OF THE 48HR GAME JAM. BUT WHAT DO THE BIG CONSOLE MANUFACTURERS HAVE TO GAIN IN THE PROCESS?

Team Default has a problem – its game is gone. Tech support has been called in and a couple of students with network experience are hanging about studying various data logs, but no one can understand what's happened. Open-mouthed, the team members are coming to a sickening realisation: the project they have been working on for the last 23 hours may have just been wiped in a cruel misunderstanding between a hard drive and a server. Welcome to Game Camp.

The concept of the rapid game development competition has become increasingly familiar over the last few years. It originated back in 2002 with the Indie Game Jam, a four-day event launched in California by, among others, coding guru Chris Hecker and *Braid* creator Jonathan Blow. Since then, new variations have cropped up all over the world, culminating in the annual Global Game Jam, which this year saw almost 1,000 teams competing at 139 jam sites across 39 countries.

But X48 Game Camp is a little different. It's not put together by a ramshackle collective of indie coders or by well-meaning academics: it is run by Microsoft, and it represents part of the corporation's attempt to reach the next generation of developers. Based within Huddersfield University's enormous computer science building, 2010's is the third outing for the event, following well-subscribed versions in Derby and Birmingham. All the competitors are studying game design and programming at nearby universities, and all are using XNA Game Studio, the toolkit designed to support and encourage game development on Xbox 360, Windows and Zune.

Among the five judges, who will also mentor the teams throughout the event, there are three senior Microsoft employees. "It's about populating our technology, promoting XNA, getting in at the ground level, getting students who are interested in making games using our tools," says **Simon Harris**, an executive producer at Microsoft Game Studios. "But it's more of a personal interest for me. Hopefully these are going to be the next geniuses of game


06:39:19
BULK
TED BAKER
PRINCES



design – the next Sid Meier or John Carmack or Tim Sweeney. Just being involved in helping people get access to the games industry is good."

It's Friday morning, an hour before the beginning of X48. Currently, the next John Carmacks are sitting in a lecture room patiently listening to a talk about health and safety ("If the computer lab is on fire, don't try to put it out"). Every game jam has a theme to build the projects around – a means of ensuring teams can't show up with pre-built code. This time it's 'giants', inspired by the name of the local rugby league team. During the subsequent lunchtime brainstorming session, most of the teams take a lateral approach to the keyword. The ambitiously named Team Awesome from Nottingham Trent University has an idea about controlling a gas giant as it flees an ever-growing black hole; Team Default envisions a sort of procedurally generated platformer in which, every time the player defeats a level, the camera pans out to reveal a larger map with further challenges. The Krunch Bunch, from University of Wales, Newport, are thinking about giant egos – their idea is a character whose head expands as he receives compliments from nearby NPCs, but shrinks when he's insulted – the player must manage the cranial size to pass different obstacles. When the teams are allowed into the sizeable computer rooms, the coding begins almost immediately. In the background, a series of projectors display giant countdown clocks on the walls.

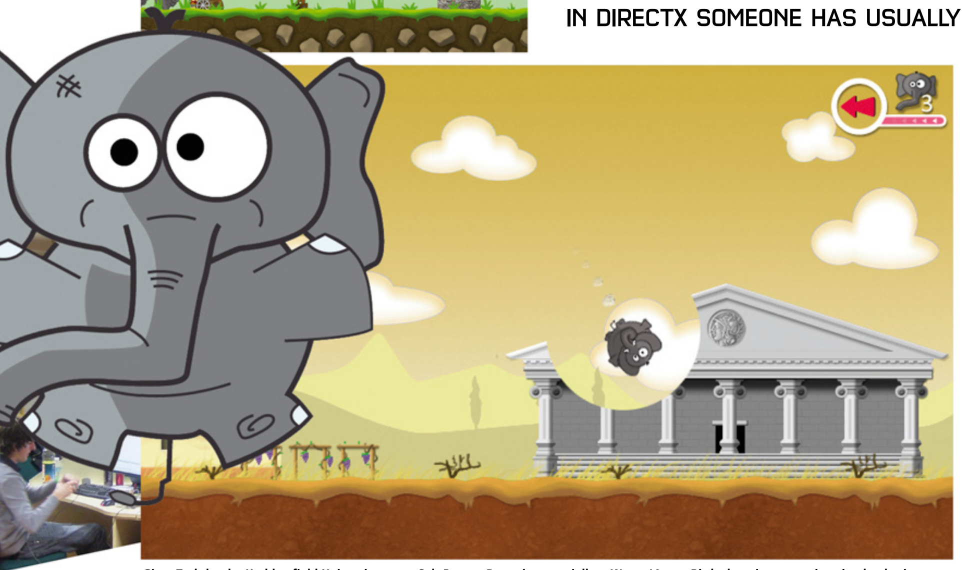
Andy Sithers, a game evangelist from Microsoft's developer tools division, is also here to check out the entrants. "We launched XNA four years ago and we've always worked directly with students; that's where events like this really work. But we've also worked with universities who want to implement it into their curriculum – it's been a big success for us; XNA is in between 40 and 50 universities in the UK, and we tend to quote 700+ worldwide. There's been a bit of a perception change – people didn't expect to see something this relevant to their courses coming out of Microsoft." Although the X48 Game Jam is currently a UK-only event (there's apparently an X48 Pizza Night in Portugal), it operates beside larger concerns like Dream-Build-Play (the global XBLA development challenge) and the Imagine Cup, which asked students for software solutions to major real-world issues. When Royal Holloway noticed a decline in applications for its computer science programme, the university built a media room with XNA kits, Xboxes and gadgets like Lego NXT Robotics, Matlab and InkScape. Both enrolment and attendance figures improved.

Back out in the lab, the approach to early development is pretty consistent. Programmers begin with core mechanics, establishing a structure for the code. "It's about really carefully compartmentalising every element of the game," says **Matthew Ryan**, lone coder on the Huddersfield University team, Preparation H. "I've just finished the input class, I'm creating the sprite class, then there's an audio class to go…" Meanwhile, the designers churn out basic placeholder art, via Photoshop and Illustrator, saving images out as PNG files which can be quickly integrated into the game code. The aim is to get something, anything, onscreen as soon as possible. A majority of the competitors reckon they can get a rough version running within three hours.

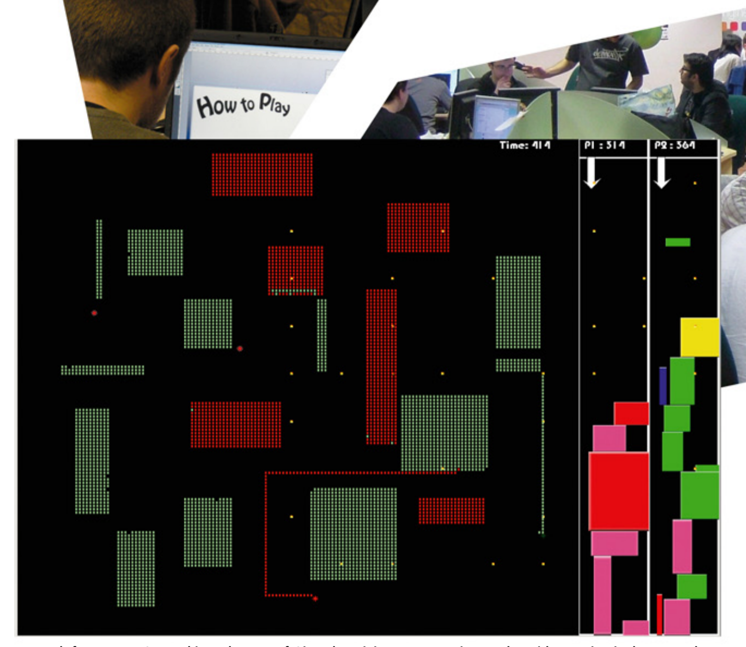
The general consensus is that XNA is a good introduction to game programming. It's not completely abstracted from the coding experience, like, say, Game Maker, but it's based around Microsoft's C# language, a more accessible alternative to C++. Plus, thanks to the maturity of the package, users can call on a vast and ever-growing range of libraries, files and handy snippets of code. "XNA has a massive selection of samples from Microsoft – AI samples, graphics, everything," says **Mark Brotherton** of Salt, Pepper, Done (named after the familiar Gordon Ramsey catchphrase). "And there's a large community as well, so you find physics engines knocking about, for example. Anything you can do in DirectX someone has usually done and they'll give it away for you to use in XNA."

"XNA HAS A MASSIVE SELECTION OF SAMPLES FROM MICROSOFT, AND THERE'S A LARGE COMMUNITY AS WELL. ANYTHING YOU CAN DO IN DIRECTX SOMEONE HAS USUALLY DONE AND THEY'LL GIVE IT AWAY"

The suite also provides the XNA Framework, a content pipeline that helps users to structure their game code, and provides some of the basic building blocks. "One example I can think of is the XNA GamePad class," says **Lewis Eddington**, a coder with Team Birthday Cake. "The GamePad code is already done for you so that you can easily begin interacting with the game controllers – detecting button presses, getting the state of the analogue sticks, telling the controller to vibrate. If we were using a language such as C++ with DirectX, it would be a hell of a lot harder to interact with a controller and would take a big chunk of our time just creating



***Giant Tusk*, by the Huddersfield University team, Salt Pepper Done, is essentially a *Worms*/*Angry Birds* clone incorporating simple physics. The team kept the Windows Phone 7 screen dimensions in mind while programming and have since created a demo for the mobile platform**



Tetrangle **from Team UOD combines elements of *Qix* and *Tetris* into one engaging puzzler. With no artists in the group, the visuals were kept simple, giving an early-'80s vibe. But it works well, and the game took third place in the competition**

the framework. There are loads of other helpful bits, such as the SpriteBatch that lets you draw an image to the screen in literally one line of code."

Indeed, it's team Birthday Cake that is making the early running. Its game, *Arrogant Incas*, is a clever cross between *Black & White* and a rhythm-action title. Two players take control of Incan gods and compete to attract the most followers by successfully performing button-press sequences near passing villagers. The visuals are neat and simple, with a single, well-drawn island location and some effective particle effects. Eddington has written the particle engine from scratch, despite never having worked on one before. "It just kind of made sense to me," he says. "A bit of Googling and you can do anything."

Everyone is working in 2D – it's just too time-consuming to produce polygonal models, though some entrants are convinced the coding involved is actually simpler. "If you're going to deal with simple bounding-box collisions it's easy to prototype a 3D game in a couple of hours," complains one of the coders from Huddersfield University's team, Ctrl Alt Elite. Ellington disagrees: "In my experience, 3D is a lot harder. There are a lot more things to consider. With 2D, when you create an image in Photoshop and you tell it to draw at a position on a screen, you know exactly how it's going to look. When you create a 3D model, it really is quite hit and miss whether you'll get the intended effect. You have to consider whether it scales correctly with the rest of your objects, what angle the camera is viewing it from, what lighting simulation you will use on the model and all kinds of things like that. While XNA does make these things easy for you, it is far more complex than working with 2D. I think it would take at least twice as long to hash out a game in 3D, even with the assets provided for you."

The restriction to two dimensions doesn't seem to have hampered aesthetic ambitions, though. In Preparation H's team, the designers are drawing the characters for their scrolling puzzler by hand, then scanning them and refining the results in Illustrator.

FIVE RULES OF GAME JAMMING

1. KEEP IT SIMPLE

Teams often get too ambitious and attempt to crowbar in as many features as they can think of. Stick to one or two key game mechanics and polish them. Judges tend to favour innovation, but the game *has* to function when the Jam countdown clock stops ticking.

2. GET IT WORKING FAST

The winning project at X48 was up and running within a couple of hours. This gave the team chance to refine its core ideas and make a solid gameplay experience. Also, you'll do your best, most creative work within the first three hours.

3. DO WHAT YOU KNOW

Work to the strengths of the team. If your coder is weak on AI, don't design something with advanced flocking systems. If your designer is influenced by *Flower*, don't start on a shooter.

4. PROGRAMMERS RULE

Never have more designers than programmers in your team – the dynamic rarely works. While you'll be cranking out art assets, the coding manpower just won't be sufficient to process it. However, all-programmer teams can work. The winner of X48, *.Dot*, by a team from Aberystwyth, was a text-based puzzler by four coders.

5. GENIUS STEALS

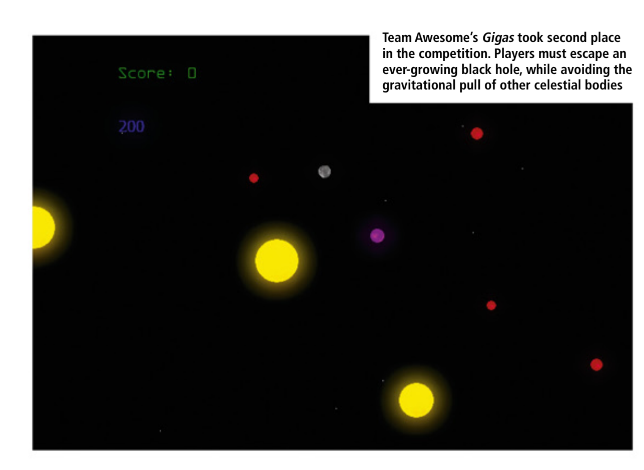
Don't be afraid to borrow great ideas – so long as they work with the theme you've been given. Also, check the rules first, but if you can get away with it, steal raw materials. Wikipedia images can work as texture maps while Garage Band loops make quick and easy soundtracks. If you don't have to do it all from scratch, don't.

With just one coder, there are doubts among the mentors that the team will have time to implement a rapidly growing range of art assets.

Krunch Bunch is in a similar position – its designers, Henry Hoffman and Andre Da Silva, have produced some great characters and scenery in a *LocoRoco* style, but the coding team is up against it. In a speech before the event, Sithers mentioned the recent release of XNA 4.0, which supports the new Windows Phone 7 platform. He challenged the teams to develop something that would be compatible with the device – Krunch Bunch took him up on it. Just one problem – the university's PCs wouldn't run XNA 4.0, so the team brought along a laptop to handle a separate phone version, while developing the main XNA 3 iteration. "So that's a multiplatform development project, including a brand-new device for which you'll find no online documentation, in 26 hours," summarises one passing mentor. The team grimly nods.

By halfway through the night, every team has something to play with up there on the screen. Some are still toiling with placeholder art; most are only managing a few minutes of gameplay. Collision detection seems to be a key concern at this stage. "We have a lot of small points around the map so it's difficult to handle the collision between the two players and each of these points," explains **Lukasz Pasek** from all-programmer team UOD. "At the moment it kind of works… XNA is a bit slow to do proper collision – it's a virtual machine so all the data is compiled slower than if you use C++, but it's enough for simple casual games."

Over at Team Hull, they've had to re-size all of



Team Awesome's *Gigas* took second place in the competition. Players must escape an ever-growing black hole, while avoiding the gravitational pull of other celestial bodies


Team Birthday Cake got its victorious *Arrogant Incas* game running in a matter of hours. Most of the night was spent fine-tuning the rhythm-action interface

The three artists in Team Preparation H bombarded their lone coder with art assets, including jetpacking scientists and the Frankenstein's monster-like lead character. Not much made it into the final game

their sprite designs, and the coders expected XNA to scale the attendant collision detection data for them, but there's no autoscale function. "It's either miles off, or the objects are going inside each other before the collision is detected," complains programmer **Harry Overs**. "We just need to keep hacking away. It would have helped if we'd drawn the sprites within rectangles, as they are intersecting, but…" His explanation trails off.

"It's been awkward, with all the parallax scrolling and the scaling," says Brotherton of Salt, Pepper, Done's collision problems. "The bounding boxes were all wrong for most of the time – so we had to think of an ingenious way round it." What was this ingenious solution? "We stuffed it all on the graphics card – that makes the collision detection calculations much faster – we can brute force it, really." Co-programmer **Jay Walton** wearily adds: "That's pretty much what this whole game is – brute force."

There has also been some drastic conceptual downsizing. Team Default's ambitious idea of an ever-magnifying, procedurally generated game environment has been scrapped – its game now resembles a very basic side-scrolling beat 'em up which seemingly involves repeatedly hitting snakes with a hammer. Meanwhile, Naked Cow from Teesside University had planned a neat survival horror platformer, in which looming shadowy monsters are transformed into harmless miniature critters whenever the player shines a torch on them. But the team couldn't get the lighting mechanic to work.

This process isn't always negative, though. Team Awesome's black hole escape game began with a complex progressive play mechanic that saw the controllable object begin life as a meteor before transforming, through subsequent game stages, into a moon, then a gas giant, then a sun. One of the judges, Dr Mike Reddy from the University of Wales, suggests they cut the whole thing down and concentrate on the sun iteration. Now they have extra time to tweak the movement mechanic, refining the physics code that sucks the player's star into the gravity field of other celestial bodies. The team leader, **Edwin Jones**, has certainly taken the simplification message on board – later on he can be heard shouting at one of the coders: "We shouldn't need written instructions! How many times have you read the instructions to *Team Fortress 2*?"

Nick Ferguson, an XBLA producer, is going from team to team, playing code and throwing out suggestions. What he's encountering most are basic interface design issues. Team UOD is using the controller's right analogue stick for movement rather than the more traditional, and comfortable, left. Also, the team's visually simple game, a neat cross between *Qix* and *Tetris*, uses the default XNA window colour – cornflower blue – in its background, and on this point Ferguson has some basic advice: "Just find a classic game and steal the palette. Just steal everything!" Elsewhere, Team Awesome has a zoom function mapped to the shoulder buttons rather than the triggers, which offer more precise analogue control and are easier to use. Having just overseen the XBLA rendition of *Perfect Dark*, Ferguson knows the importance of fine-tuning condensed gameplay experiences. "It's an interesting microcosm of the games industry out there," he says later. "You've got four teams doing spaceship games, then you've got people doing god stuff, people who've identified a genre and just want to copy it. Then you've got a few teams who are completely out there! You've no idea if it'll work or not, but you're just glad they're there."

With two hours to go, most teams have got as close as they're going to get to a playable game. The designers are now working up design documents for the presentations they all have to give at the end, while the coders are doing what they can to patch together something resembling a game structure. Team Default is in the midst of its disappearing-game trauma. Default is using Subversion, an open-source version-control system that lets each programmer commit code to a shared file. "It says it's taken work from the local computer and written it to the server," explains **Ben Ash**. "But it seems to have cut certain

EARN WHILE YOU LEARN

The X48 entrants work fast because most of them are experienced XNA users, and some have already developed and published titles. At Huddersfield University, for example, XNA development makes up a key element of the game design and programming courses, especially in the first year. The students can also spend their placement year at the university's own development studio, Canalside, which has so far produced two Xbox 360 titles: *Yo-Ho Kablammo* on XBLA and the Xbox Indie Games shooter *Missing Reel*. But the openness of current digital distribution systems means students are able to find their own way to market. For example, two X48 competitors, Jay Walton and Oli Jones, have developed XBLIG title *Perl Mania* in their own time.

But it's not just Microsoft's digital platforms benefiting from this growing determination to publish student work. Sony has PSP devkits in 30 universities across Europe and Australasia, and is encouraging students to enter their projects into the University of Abertay's annual Dare to Be Digital competition as well into Sony's formal publishing pipeline. "We're hoping to have our first university PSP Minis game get through submission and QA very soon," says SCEE's Sarah Lemarié. "Any student team could try submitting a PSP Minis title, and we are really interested to hear from and help those that wish to go for it. "

data from the computer, written it to the server, and then changed the data without revising anyone else with the server code."

The explanation doesn't make much sense, but then the teams have been up for two days. Everyone is making mistakes. Often, it's syntax and spelling, but once in a while the coding process simply breaks down. "Sometimes you declare a variable, type in '=', but then just don't do anything with it," says **Ahmed Zaman** from Krunch Bunch. "You're like, 'Why isn't this working – this code makes sense! Oh, oh no, it doesn't'." And then, perfectly timed to illustrate this sense of collapsing cognitive abilities, the Team Default code turns up. No one had thought to run Windows search on each of their hard drives – they have a go and, bingo, there it is.

At three o'clock on Saturday afternoon, an air horn sounds, and it's all over. The teams file out into a lecture theatre next door, leaving behind hundreds of empty energy drink cans and chocolate bar wrappers. The judges head back to an office to deliberate. Although the moderators are generally impressed that a majority of the teams have functioning gameplay elements, there's an agreement that most have failed to implement key structural basics – a score system, a game over dynamic – and that some were determined to develop certain game types regardless of the theme. "There's a suspicion Salt Pepper Done would have made an *Angry Birds* clone whatever," says Harris about *Giant Tusk*, which involves catapulting elephants over the Alps into ancient Rome. "They clearly said: 'What's the theme? Giants? OK, we're chucking elephants…'" Twenty minutes later the discussion is over. UOD gets third place, Team Awesome second and Team Birthday Cake first. "They just kept making progress," says Harris of the winners. "With a few hours to go they added power-ups and when I played the final version they'd changed the number of players from two to four." "It was just really well balanced," adds Reddy.

Ultimately, what X48 has revealed is the increasing commercialisation of the game jam format. The presence of Microsoft is a part of that, but it's also about competitors' ambitions. They're not bashing out experiments to be distributed free amid a dedicated community – most of the teams are planning to polish their projects for Xbox Indie Games. This entrepreneurial approach has, of course, been facilitated by the era of digital distribution, in which today's indie cult can seamlessly become tomorrow's mainstream success story. "I taught myself programming with Net Yaroze," reminisces Ferguson. "This is so much bigger. There's now a full development environment, you can write for Xbox, you can write for PC – and there's actually a market for these games. With Yaroze we were keeping our fingers crossed that we'd get on the Official PlayStation Magazine cover disc. Now you can make a game and sell it in all sorts of different formats."

And although Krunch Bunch was the only team to try Windows Phone 7 development on the day, Salt Pepper Done designed its title with the specs and screen resolution of the platform in mind – there's already a demo, and the team is looking into getting it on the Windows app store. As Harris mentioned, it's an *Angry Birds* clone – but the team knows enough about emerging formats to understand that being 'first to market' with a well-known game mechanic can be ridiculously profitable.

As for Microsoft, X48 is part of a student charm offensive that's gone largely unchallenged over the last few years. This, however, is about to change. Sony invented the whole concept of the educational development console with Yaroze, and now its PS3 Academic Development Programme, which aims to get mini PS3 devkits into universities, is just coming out of limited closed beta at Abertay University. The kit uses Sony's PhyreEngine, a free crossplatform development engine with similar features to XNA. The company also runs a PSP Academic Development Programme. "We have 30 universities across Europe and Australasia registered, with varying levels of activity happening at each place," explains **Sarah Lemarié**, infrastructure manager and academic liaison at SCEE. "Some have really engaged with us and our studios, whereas others have purely taken a couple of kits for research projects. Currently we're trying to encourage a few universities to put teams forward for Dare to be Digital."

Sony has a way to go to catch up with Microsoft in terms of student usage, though – so does this mean we'll have a generation of new game staff who're naturally inclined, even just a little, toward Xbox? Sithers, Ferguson and Harris are all keen to say that this isn't really the intention – it's about getting students engaged with game development of all types. **Ruth Taylor**, who runs Huddersfield University's Canalside Studios (see 'Earn while you learn'), is sceptical that students will develop a bias toward Xbox development thanks to XNA and events like X48. "Microsoft has made it much easier for students to engage in game development. They can build something quickly and show off their ideas," she says, "but do I think Microsoft is winning a hearts and minds victory with the current generation of students? Not really. The love affair is with games, the platform just happens to be the venue."

"THERE'S NOW A FULL DEVELOPMENT ENVIRONMENT, YOU CAN WRITE FOR XBOX, YOU CAN WRITE FOR PC – AND THERE'S A MARKET. YOU CAN MAKE A GAME AND SELL IT IN ALL SORTS OF DIFFERENT FORMATS"



Krunch Bunch produced some vibrant *LocoRoco*-inspired art, but the decision to develop for the Windows Phone 7 standard gave its coders a series of insurmountable technical challenges

North East England:

a major player in digital gaming, software and the web*

*Source - Ipsos MORI



The digital and gaming sector in North East England is strong and growing, with leading companies such as Ubisoft, Eutechnyx and Sage attracting international interest for their innovation.

One of the best venture capital environments for digital start-ups in the UK, the area is well supported by venture capital investors and the new Finance for Business Funds, which includes £40m for technology funding, £80m allocated for business growth and additional development funding - the first of its type in England. Businesses also benefit from extensive links between innovation centres, support networks, universities, top-quality incubator facilities and an excellent range of high-tech business parks.

Codeworks is the centre of excellence for digital innovation in the North East, providing business support and contacts and helping to attract R&D funding. Gaming businesses can benefit hugely from GameHorizon, the trade association for the regional games industry, which is unique in the UK.

DigitalCity at Teesside University provides world-class premises, infrastructure and tailored industry specific support for all existing digital media and start up businesses. Sunderland Software City actively helps to attract investment into business software development and enterprise growth, while Northern Film & Media for North East England provides support and funding for digital content.

This purpose-designed infrastructure is key to the fact that, in recent years, North East England has seen more new technology company start-ups than anywhere in the UK outside London.





Brian Jobling, MD, Eutechnyx

CASE STUDY: EUTECHNYX - BRIAN JOBLING

From winning Game of the Year with its first product in 1988, Eutechnyx has grown to encompass studios in Chengdu, Hong Kong and Pittsburgh, as well as its North East England HQ. The company has produced games for Activision Blizzard, Electronic Arts, THQ, Take 2, and most recently developed the critically acclaimed Ferrari Challenge. Eutechnyx is currently working on Ride to Hell for Deep Silver and a free to play MMO community game.

Helping to lead the way in a strong sector, Gateshead-born MD Brian says he has no problem recruiting top talent to the business. “The commitment and work ethic here is very inspiring,” he says, “and the support from business networks is an invaluable asset.”

Find out more about North East England’s innovative digital sector at

www.northeastengland.co.uk/digital



KEY FACTS:

- The North East has one of the best venture capital environments for digital start-ups in the UK (reinforced by developments such as the extension of Northstar Equity Investors' [NSEI] Design and Creative Fund and the recent launch of Codeworks' Digital Evaluation Vehicle [DEV] initiative)
- The North East has particular strengths in the areas of games and the web, alongside an increasing emphasis on software. The focus of the area's key digital-related agencies - DigitalCity, Sunderland Software City, Codeworks and Northern Film & Media - is closely linked to these areas of existing strength or anticipated growth
- The £10m Boho One building - the first of three buildings that will form the core of Middlesbrough's Boho Zone - provides a hub for accelerating digital businesses
- North East England is home to the GameHorizon conference - Europe's leading event for international games executives, which will take place in June 2010
- Teesside University's Institute of Digital Innovation is celebrating the creation of its 100th new start-up business since its inception
- Over a three year period, the DigitalCity project on Teesside has helped 44 successful companies to launch, trade and continue trading, creating around 300 jobs
- Codeworks' 'Jobs in Digital' recruitment fair, held in Newcastle in March 2009, attracted over 750 graduates and experienced professionals - a 25% increase over the 2008 event
- In the 2008 Research Assessment Exercise, the University of Sunderland was recognised as carrying out 'world-leading' research in computer science
- NewcastleGateshead has just been named as the UK's most creative city by The DRUM



© Steve Lomas





Herb Kim,
CEO, Codeworks

CASE STUDY: CODEWORKS - HERB KIM

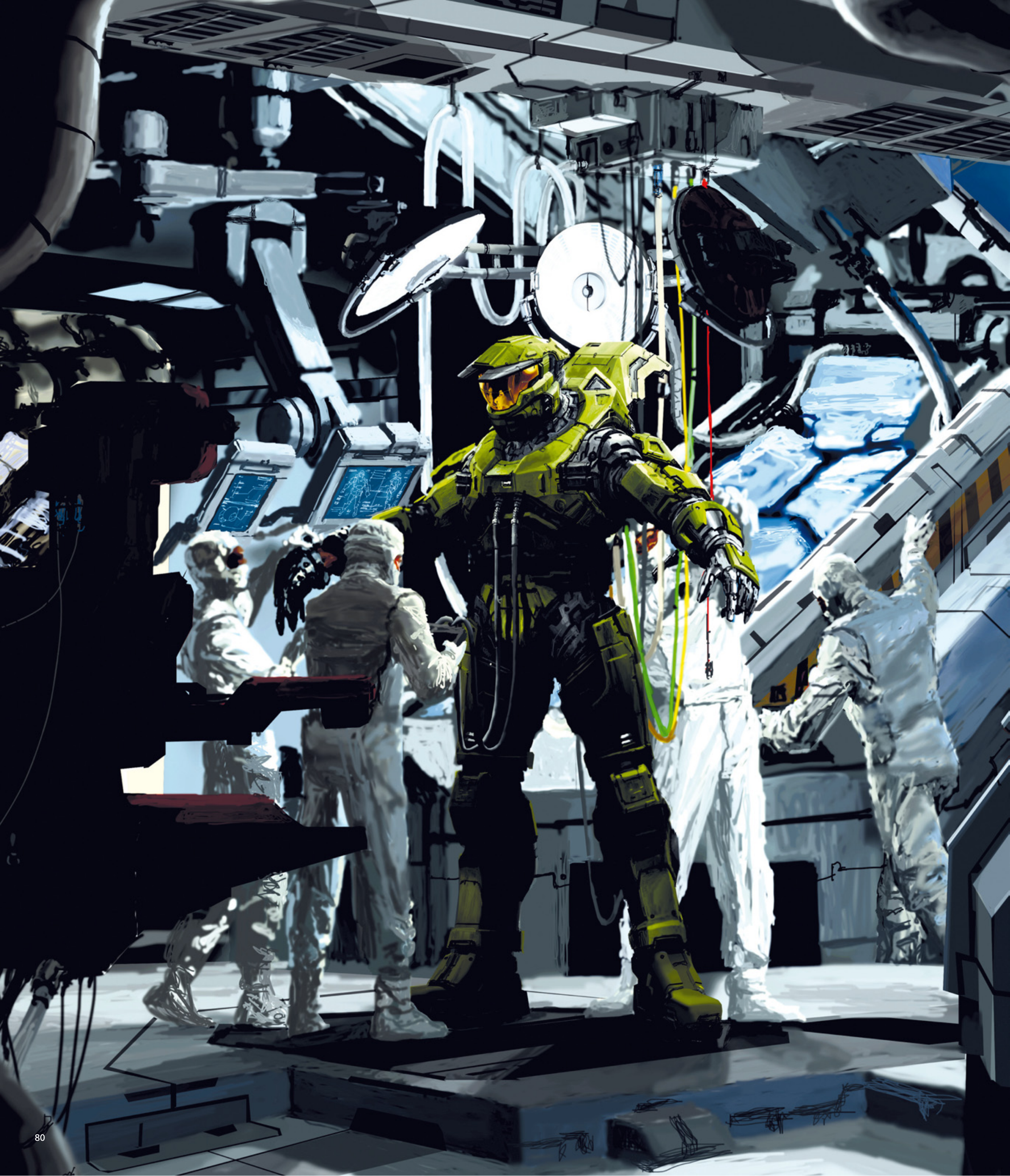
Codeworks is the centre for digital innovation based in Sunderland, North East England. A business support organisation, it brings together digital companies, entrepreneurs, university researchers, venture capitalists and other innovators to create and/or develop new and existing digital media technology companies in the area.

CEO Herb was born in Brooklyn, New York, and is a graduate of both Princeton University and the Wharton School. He is also the founder and director of the Thinking Digital conference, which takes place each May in NewcastleGateshead.

"As well as developing new products and spinouts we raise venture capital and run two trade associations: Codeworks Connect and Codeworks GameHorizon," says Herb. "These are hugely successful, facilitating commercial collaboration and providing hands-on support to digital technology and media companies of all sizes."

Aided by such comprehensive support, the North East now hosts some of the world's leading games development companies, and nearly 10% of the UK games development employment base is located in the area.

north east
england



2001: A SPACE ODYSSEY

HOW A '90S MAC DEVELOPER DEFINED THE CONSOLE FPS OF THE LAST DECADE: WE LOOK BACK TO WHEN BUNGIE STARTED THE FIGHT

If you want to know why *Halo* is one of the games of the last decade, it's not too hard to find reasons. You can almost reel them off – there's the 30 seconds of fun, the two-weapon limit, the regenerating shield and the role as flagbearer for Microsoft's fledgling Xbox console. There's the context of where the console FPS was in 2001. The big things like AI and the small ones like incidental dialogue. Talking about why *Halo* was and is brilliant almost risks turning into a checklist, not least thanks to the sheer size of what Microsoft has subsequently built around it.

But what was *Halo* before it became *Halo*? A mould-breaking, market-cracking FPS that stunned players, critics and probably even Microsoft itself. A day-one release for the original Xbox that instantly legitimised its entry into the market, showing there was much more to Microsoft's strategy than deep pockets. A brilliant, gorgeous FPS. An atmosphere that draws in influences and shades them in Bungie's vivid greens and shining blues. Though it may be derivative of other material, though the alien war waged around you has been depicted in countless big-screen blockbusters, and though the journey of the Great Green Hope may be, by any standards, trite, everyone who's played it remembers *Halo*. It sears the memory with Needler shards and fluorescent, hissing sticky bombs thrown in haste and detonating just in time. It's written in purple lights, orchestral overtures, bullets, stars and Warthog tracks.

Halo is also a literal place. The titular, world-ending construct is an environment the like of which hadn't been seen in games. That first glimpse remains remarkable: stepping from a cramped pod into fields and mountains, the sky bisected by a structure that goes on and on. The short and obligatory 'abandon ship' prologue exists purely to foreground what you expect from the genre: the confines of walkways and funnelled directives. Since *Doom*, the genre has shown snapshots of the outside world – distant cities painted in bitmap greys and brown hues – but *Halo* is the outside world. The

HALO SEARS THE MEMORY WITH NEEDLER SHARDS AND FLUORESCENT, HISSING STICKY BOMBS. IT'S WRITTEN IN PURPLE LIGHTS, BULLETS, STARS AND WARTHOG TRACKS

TITLE: **HALO: COMBAT EVOLVED**
ORIGINAL FORMAT: **XBOX**
PUBLISHER: **MICROSOFT**
DEVELOPER: **BUNGIE**
ORIGIN: **US**
RELEASE: **2001**

environments are simply huge, and even the corridors give your seven-foot starship trooper a wide berth. Exploration isn't encouraged by pickups or rewards – *Halo* has precious few treasures to be hunted – but is an end unto itself. It's all a happy accident, because it's a world that predates the Master Chief himself.

"Before we knew what we were making, we had most of those environments," says **Chris Butcher**, AI programmer on the project (incidentally, and surprisingly, the first location built was The Silent Cartographer). A big part of why *Halo*'s environments are such a pleasure to traverse is how you traverse them, and upon considering that one of *Halo*'s prototype forms was an RTS, pieces click into place. Bungie wanted to take its show on the road. "I think the Warthog is the real reason *Halo* became an action game," says designer **Jaime Griesemer**. "In the old RTS-style game it was just so cool to watch a squad of jeeps driving across the terrain [that] we wanted to drive them ourselves. And then we wanted to get out of them and run around as an infantry guy and from there it snowballed into what we eventually shipped. In some ways, *Halo* is the story of the Warthog and the universe we built to drive it around in."

It's certainly one of the biggest stars. Attaching camera control to steering shouldn't have worked, but granted drivers the opportunity to fully observe their surroundings, like a mouse click directing the field of view of an RPG avatar. It's a hulking beast in full flight, but requires co-operation (you driving, plus a gunner) to be a real threat, so keeping your comrade out of excessive fire is as much a priority as raising hell. The Covenant have their own shiny toys, but it's a mark of the Warthog's calibre that a Ghost or Banshee is no substitute. The car in front is a badass.

...AND THE HORSE YOU RODE IN ON

"The last level, the escape, came about in the last weeks of development," says Butcher. "We originally had planned just a cutscene with the Chief taking off, but then decided we wanted a real climax. It was originally going to be a driving and fighting section, but we thought that was too much. The real problem was the Warthog – we'd refined it throughout the campaign levels and then suddenly you couldn't land a jump. We had to really tweak the feedback for that section."

But *Halo* just as often strands you without a ride: out on a limb, outnumbered and outgunned in an environment that's suddenly too big for comfort. And if the Warthog's a star, the Covenant are showstoppers. "It was the AI, the encounters we didn't have [when the levels were built]," continues Butcher. "So it was a case of figuring out where to place them." *Halo*'s AI isn't outstandingly complex, but it's constantly surprising: the Covenant's defensive rolls, grenades and squad hierarchies combine with their baser desire to shoot you lots to make a shifting, unified force. "We designed them that way because we knew we wanted to have wave attacks in our title," says Butcher. "We went from that bunch of concept designs to a full-on console title in a very short time."

A full-on army is more like it. Merely refined by *Halo*'s sequels, and mystifyingly uncopied (competently), the Elites and Grunts are the base for a pulsing cocktail of hostility. They're like a pack, the group prodding and breaking on to you in tandem, Grunts sacrificed for attention while Elites creep outside of your sightline. Griesemer: "The idea was that the Elites were like graceful, predatory cats and the Grunts were like crazy little monkeys. The Covenant are a tool for the users to deconstruct and play around with."









The basic pistol could be as effective as a sniper rifle at range – it did huge damage, had a zoom, and was the weapon of choice for cheap Chiefs in our multiplayer sessions. It was underpowered for the sequels, and revived by *ODST* – perhaps a minor theme in *Halo*'s weapon set when you consider the assault rifle (dropped for *Halo 2*, then the default for *Halo 3*). Naturally, every instalment lets you destroy things with rockets

There's an encounter soon after your first steps on Halo that's one of many peaks, and illustrates how your opponents work perfectly. Driving in to support a marine position, you're presented with a maze of rocks that tower over your head, the high ground where the marines are posted, and a stretch of open ground to where the Covenant dropships are about to land. Gung-ho charge? Snipe with the marines? Hide in the rocks and pick off advancing enemies from behind? Whatever your answer, you quickly realise that the Covenant will soon give their own reply. They'll cut you down with concentrated crossfire, or rush the ridge and overpower your meagre group with massed numbers, or perhaps start hunting you through those selfsame rocks. You adapt or die.

It's why that shield works so well. Adopted wholesale by the FPS genre post-*Halo*, recharging health is more often than not a crutch for attritional can-shoots. Here it's what the combat system is built around, a flowing switch between attack and defence that forces strategies to be changed and discarded over the space of seconds. The Covenant forces pick and poke at you before any all-out charge, almost like the Grunts are working up their courage, tempting distance shots and, inevitably, a hail of return fire. You're hit, the reddening screen and urgent bloops switch your mind into turtling mode, and the hunt begins: seconds until you recharge, seconds you haven't always got. Fights that should be epic brawls turn into tense, creeping affairs where the silence is only broken by your element of surprise – or theirs. Hide-and-seek is as much a part of *Halo* as headshots.

Engagements are stretched out across a vast terrain, travelled between in long stretches where the only sound is a pair of heavy-duty wheels. *Halo*'s pacing is cursed to forever be associated with '30 seconds of fun' – not because that's an inaccurate description, but because it's only one part of a polymorphous whole. It describes the basic guiding principle that underlies *Halo*'s combat: each encounter should last just long enough to get the blood pumping and create a real sense of peril, before offering up a respite. Sounds neat, but *Halo* isn't bound by it.

Engagements aren't of a type, but switch from popping a few Grunt heads to full-on, drawn-out ambushes and counter-offensives, even entire levels constructed from waves, like the rings of zombie bullet hell (but more on the Library later). That respite can be a



The Chief in a quiet moment. His height is obvious around humans, making it clear you're not just a saviour: you're a seven-foot saviour

THE COVENANT WILL CUT YOU DOWN WITH CONCENTRATED CROSSFIRE, OR RUSH THE RIDGE AND OVERPOWER YOUR GROUP WITH MASSED NUMBERS

It's an on/off type of play perfectly complemented by your armoury. The two-weapon restriction brings an element of practicality to your fantastical tools: maps didn't direct you to weapons, they offered them to you. The talent was in choosing. Would you whittle away an overshield with a full clip then charge in for some buckshot to the brain? Or unload a Needler and finish off with a crown-caving pistol shot? Whether to leave behind your favourite, but half-empty, weapon for a fully loaded alternative is a constant worry – there's nothing worse than stubbornly sticking to your old sniper rifle only to end up in a room crammed with Covenant and all the wrong kinds of ammo.

The choices and strategies that the Covenant, the weapons, and your capabilities open up are what gives *Halo* all those little degrees of freedom – which is where its nomadic, player-authored stories come from. Engagements, particularly in the game's moody, tense opening, five-minute drive, a meet-up with reinforcements or three seconds snatched beneath a rock under withering plasma fire. As a rough principle you can see the place of those 30 seconds in *Halo*'s combat, but it's grossly unfair to take it as emblematic of such an expertly measured and twisted whole.

It's why, as much as any 4x4 leap of faith or sharpened one-liner, it's the quiet times that get you. These are the moments in which you think. Standing alone in a clearing, you're so awed by that construction looping the sky that the Master Chief almost seems on the wrong scale. The frequent, brief silences, or the tranquillity of the Cartographer's underground hub, is heightened to modern sensibilities by the lack of a sprint or roadie run, now an FPS given (even, it seems, for the next *Halo*). There's an unerring steadiness to the Master Chief's movements across the galaxy that gives a sense of invincibility, a sluggishness that hints at your size and

strength without restricting avenues for attack and navigation.

This was thanks in large part to a control scheme mapped to a somewhat divisive controller. Butcher didn't see the plate with handles as an obstacle: "I actually think the original Xbox controller has the most responsive set of twin sticks around – even over any of the current-gen handsets. Initially we were developing and testing with Sidewinders, which had a similar setup to the Xbox controller. I really wish there was some way for me to use that controller with the 360."

Though it certainly wasn't a one-size invitation to FPS fans, the control system proved to be another of *Halo*'s most lasting influences. Without the quick precision of a mouse, the console FPS hadn't dared dabble with jumping since *Turok: Dinosaur Hunter* had made a prehistoric chore of it. The instant melee attack, too, was almost unheard of. The inspiration was close to home. "A lot of our ideas came from thirdperson action titles," says Butcher. "Virtually every single one of them had 'A' for jump and 'B' for melee. We experimented with a thirdperson camera at one stage, having made [2001 PC shooter] *Oni* and really enjoyed it."

And a word for the surround-sound score – another landmark. It's at turns haunting, funny, sinister and brave enough to leave you alone. At its scene-stealing peak it fuses religious chanting and tribal bombast as effectively as the Covenant, creating a soundscape of exhilarating power and instant iconic status. "[Composer Marty O'Donnell]'s own voice is on the title screen, you know – a monk in that choir," Griesemer says in the matter-of-fact way that's so typically Bungie. "And his wife was in the choir for the sequel," adds Butcher.

As for the effects, the weapons construct their own symphonies: the assault rifle's bassline, a Needler's percussion or the monotone drumming of a minigun. Grenades thump the air and break the silence. And finally the sheer usefulness of the audio: hearing where your enemies are – and what they are doing. *Halo*'s 8,087 lines of dialogue, which are mostly background chatter for combat, not only let you listen in on marines but also second-guess the chatty Covenant's distorted English (Grunts, by the way, were given their 'crazy monkey' voicing by Joseph Staten, current series writer). Interestingly, the marines were originally supposed to be distraught in both action and words – but were charged up

"I ACTUALLY THINK THE ORIGINAL XBOX CONTROLLER HAS THE MOST RESPONSIVE SET OF TWIN STICKS AROUND – EVEN OVER ANY OF THE CURRENT-GEN HANDSETS"

CHAPTER TWO

There are those who'll argue that *Halo*'s successor should have pride of place, mainly because of its exceptional multiplayer. Following three years after the original, *Halo 2* wasn't just a fine successor but the most important Live title Xbox ever had: it dominated online, sold hugely, and established the best matchmaking system out there at the first time of asking. On April 15, five and a half years since release, it was turned off.

No other last-gen game had its legs: when Microsoft announced the closure, everyone who'd played it had the same thought: 'Got to play *Halo 2* again'. The end of Live support may not have been a good thing for the playerbase, but it did at least let everyone plan the funeral. Without such a prompt, it's doubtful many would have gone back at all. This was a chance to say goodbye.

That music starts, more poignant than ever. The old loading screens, the wireframe backgrounds with their blue marines, and you're into a match surprisingly quickly. Hit the Double Team playlist for a warm-up: it's all coming back.



The Hunter is the Covenant heavyweight, and crops up enough for you to perfect tactics. The **Edge** tip: your humble handgun can kill this thing with one well-aimed shot in the back

Soon we're playing Tower of Power, a mad variant of the Ascension map: one team has a tower with a mounted gun, the other a lot of open ground to traverse and shotguns. The lucky gunner nearly always has a field day. There's time for a sudden death win in CTF on Zanzibar, a few custom games of zombies, and an extended Warthog run on Coagulation. A familiar *Halo 2* thing happens: it's much later than we think.

Tired and emotional, we notice Bungie's got in on the act, staff members cropping up in matchmaking, the 'Did You Know' boxout between matches full of arch messages ("I am your father! Use voice masking to add at least ten years to your online persona") and newbie tactics ("Dual wielding. When all else fails, circle strafe"). Team Slayer on Midship for the last time, no looking back and both teams know it.

Both reach 40 kills, both get cautious. The real reason *Halo 2*'s multiplayer design surpasses its competitors is right here: it's a game that rewards teams rather than individuals. The persistent levelling of *COD* rewards regardless of the success and failure of the team – *Halo 2*'s persistence is in one number indicating your level, one that can go up and down.

Every kill counts for something. Team Slayer games are the first to 50, and even new players understand that when your opponents get close, you have to be a little more cautious. *Halo* is very rarely two loose alliances running at each other just trying to rack up kills.

And back on Midship, it's over. Not with a neat sword slice, or a typical dual wield, or even up close and personal with the shotgun. It's a sticky that seems to hang forever in the air before landing with a sizzle on the floor, just as an enemy turns the corner. Blind luck, really. But sweet as a nut all the same.

In the end we had to switch off, because there could have been as many last games as we wanted – the deadline didn't quite fall like an axe. Every player will have had a different *Halo 2*, and a different ending. For us, it was Midship and a fluke sticky. That's the way *Halo 2* arrived, and ended: not with a whimper, but a bang.





Halo 2's multiplayer focus put balance at the fore – and meant weapons like the energy sword (which was wielded by an Elite in the original but couldn't be used) became a key part of the arsenal. If *Halo 2*'s weapon set demonstrates anything, it's how up-close and ranged weapons can complement each other













The Covenant vehicles were tweaked for the sequel, but the Warthog's basic design is still that of the original (and if they change it for *Reach*, we'll be setting up the internet petition)

with a little levity to make you feel like a real hero. "With the marines, we had originally designed their animations vastly different to how they turned out," Griesemer says. "The initial idea was that when you jumped in the Hog they'd be clinging to the minigun, crying their eyes out. But we wanted to encourage the player, so that's why we decided to change it and have them hollering and screaming 'woo-hoo!' They're with you, they're behind you all the way."

It's a big part of why this gung-ho space epic is so great – *Halo*'s a world that really makes you feel like the big, bad Master Chief. Its huge popular success is testament to Bungie's knack for crowd-pleasing storytelling and daft-but-brilliant lines. "We are going to blow the hell out of those dumb bugs until we don't have anything left to shoot 'em with! And then, we are going to strangle them with their own living guts!" The words of Sergeant Johnson. Go on, then, one more: "Well, I don't care if it's God's own anti-son-of-a-bitch machine, or a giant hula hoop, we're not gonna let 'em have it!"

That said, *Halo* took its sci-fi influences from far beyond standard videogame tropes. "When we were starting out on PC we had designs on a much more text-based narrative," says Griesemer. "There are hints of that in Cortana's log books, something more like *Marathon*, which was popular and we loved doing." Butcher adds: "I think videogame sci-fi tends to be much more concerned with lasers and guns, whereas literary sci-fi is about themes."





Bungie is known for exhaustive QA, but back then things were a little more homely. "QA testing was where Microsoft really helped as a resource," says Butcher, discussing multiplayer. "But then again we were doing a lot of it ourselves, we'd be playing 16-player, 90-minute games on Blood Gulch after hours. Everything came together in such a short time. Talk about a test centre – we had four TVs with 16 guys crowded around"

The literary influence runs deep in the bowels of the Bungie ship. Shooting aliens may be *Halo*'s hook, but if the mechanics are an expert mix then the world is an equally considered concoction. "All of us here at Bungie are huge fans of sci-fi literature," says Griesemer, "and of course there are shades of Iain M Banks – think of Consider Phlebas with the ship being destroyed. But the influence of something like [Larry Niven's] Ringworld isn't necessarily in the design – it's in that feeling of being somewhere else. That sense of scale and an epic story going on out there. One of the main sources of inspiration was Armour, by Robert Stately, in which a soldier has to constantly re-live the same war over and over again. That sense of hopelessness, a relentless battle, was influential."

Such grand ambition may sound hollow to those still digesting Sergeant Johnson's B-movie wit, but it's truly reflected in the design rather than the script. Wondering when the Library would crop up again? It's the one link in *Halo*'s chain that can turn the most ardent supporter a ghostly grey, a linear map that gives you no avenue for escape, no space for improvisation and no longer a sense of invincibility. It's the closest thing *Halo* has to a dungeon crawl. And, according to Butcher, exactly what was intended: "Don't forget that The Library comes right after the Silent Cartographer – the pinnacle of your engagement with the Covenant. We wanted to change the pace and give you something different, and also it was about populating a space we had already designed."

That population was made up of The Flood, a mob of mutants with kamikaze pathfinding, hell-bent on destroying your shield and reminding you of the thin line between life and death. Jarringly grotesque in design, they're a mass of beige blobs and limbs, the antithesis of the neons that inform everything else, and Griesemer cites one particular source: "A major influence I know of was a book by Christopher Rowley called The Vang, about an alien species that was invading and assimilating people. The Vang were basically The Flood but it took days for their gestation period to transform people." Even in its flawed moments, *Halo* is offering a new experience rather than a retread of an old one.

"MICROSOFT THOUGHT HALO WAS NOT A GOOD NAME. THE COMPROMISE WAS THEY COULD ADD A SUBTITLE, BUT THE REAL NAME OF THE GAME IS JUST HALO"

It almost tempts you into that '*Combat Evolved*' tag. When we say *Halo* we mean *Halo: Combat Evolved*, the subtitle that named a thousand magazine features. So, a slight digression into the making of a super-franchise: "Oh, man… the subtitle," groans Griesemer. Those suspicious of marketers rejoice: "At the time, Microsoft marketing thought *Halo* was not a good name for a videogame brand. It wasn't descriptive like all the military games we were competing with." What can you do? "We told them *Halo* was the name."

Things are, alas, never so simple. "The compromise was they could add a subtitle. Everyone at Bungie hated it. But it turned out to be a very sticky label and has now entered the gaming lexicon to the point where articles that have nothing to do with *Halo* get titles like 'Skateboarding Evolved'. So I guess in hindsight it was a good compromise." Let's not leave it at that. "But the real name of the game is just *Halo*."

From 2010's perch, it seems laughable that anyone could doubt *Halo* as a brand name. It's worth pointing out, however, that it's arguably the trailblazer for today's FPS-franchise-heavy console landscape – its success and subsequent

The human and Covenant tech differs in effect, from the aliens' battery-based shield-draining plasma weapons to the brutish Scorpion tank



building by Microsoft into one of gaming's premier 'brands' the model everyone wants to copy. No other game, for good or ill, has had such visible influence on this generation's HD consoles.

The force of nature gives Griesemer some pause for eccentric, grandiose speculation. "There were a lot of very talented people working on *Halo*, but it was also about timing. I think the world wanted an epic, heroic story in the fall of 2001 – they wanted to see the world saved." In Griesemer's defence, it's not like Hollywood was in contention that year. But whatever the reason, from the fan-community engagement to spin-off books and multimillion-dollar advertising campaigns, *Halo* didn't just become a success, it became a beacon for the FPS as contemporary phenomenon and mainstream franchise.

But the story of *Halo*'s development, the Master Chief's crusade and the receipts (lifetime sales are around eight million) are only part of the picture. Ask any fan, any clan member, what they remember most and you'll be bombarded with anecdotes about Blood Gulch campers and Warthogs launched into the atmosphere by some cunningly placed grenades. The articulate and reserved Griesemer falls victim to goose-bumps himself: "It comes in one of the Arctic sections. You've just fought your way through the Covenant wall, you've broken their backs, and then you leap into the Banshee and take off and the music kicks in. That's still what *Halo*'s about for me." Does anyone not give into the temptation to chant along?

Halo's the kind of game that gets grown men giddy at the prospect of a new instalment. Its legacy on discussion forums, on YouTube and in machinima is a story in itself, growing out of its freeform interactions – and procrastination. "The player agency really stemmed from getting lost in huge maps," says Butcher. "That point when you just say: 'Urgh… I'm totally lost, what do you do now?' And you play around." Most of all, *Halo* never repeats itself: every encounter's somehow different. Things never happen the same way twice – and so you never react the same way twice. For all you can say about *Halo*, there's the mark of a true original: its most distinctive quality can't be quantified.



SIZE MATTERS

"My favourite anecdote relates to Blood Gulch and the Scorpion tank," says Griesemer. "Some of the guys were really panicking towards the end, saying we had to take out the tank altogether, that it wasn't in the game enough. But we really wanted to drive it around Blood Gulch, we thought that would be so cool. So the tank stayed purely for that reason." Blood Gulch is also responsible for some of *Halo*'s finest weapons: "We were given too much licence, you might say. And that's how maps like Chiron happen [laughs]. We only had a couple of weeks to implement multiplayer from scratch. The sniper rifle's scope is a direct result of the gap between the bases in Blood Gulch. And we didn't have a shotgun, either, until that point."



Saving marines is a weird paradox: the Covenant cut through them without any trouble, especially on the higher difficulties, and they're not all that useful. But come on: you're the Master Chief

Subscribe to **Edge** and receive a handheld console featuring 20 Sega Mega Drive games

- Receive a portable console featuring Mega Drive hits
- Save 25% off the cover price
- Pay by Direct Debit – only £10.97 per quarter
- Delivery direct to your door
- Never miss an issue



BLAZE®

Portable console with 20 Sega Mega Drive games built in, including *Shinobi 3*, *Golden Axe*, *Sonic & Knuckles* and *Ecco The Dolphin*. Supplied with an AV cable for TV output functionality

Requires three AAA batteries (not included). For more info, visit

www.blazeeurope.com

Living in the US or Canada?

Subscribe to **Edge** and save yourself over $35! (No gift, unfortunately – just a great saving)

Call toll free: 1-800-428-3003 (ref: a142)
Online: www.imsnews.com/edge-a142

ONLINE: myfavouritemagazines.co.uk/edg/P149
CALL: 0844 848 2852 (quote ref P149)

Offer for UK Direct Debit subscribers only. You will receive 13 issues per year. Your subscription will start with the next available issue. Minimum subscription term is 12 months. If at any time in the first 60 days you are dissatisfied please notify us in writing and we will refund you for all un-mailed issues. The gift is subject to availability. In the unlikely event of stocks becoming exhausted, we reserve the right to substitute with items of a similar value. Offer ends June 22 2010. Order ref: P149. Prices for overseas subscribers can be found at www.myfavouritemagazines.co.uk/edg

Review

New games assessed in words and numbers

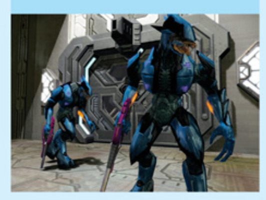
Edge's most played

Halo



We went back through on Legendary, all guns blazing, and several days and deaths later blew that mother sky-high, cheering all the way. It's been too long, Chief.
XBOX, MICROSOFT

Halo 2



Battle Rifles on Lockout, Tower of Power on Ascension, CTF Double Team on Midship – all as brilliant the last time around as they were the first. Adieu, Master Chief 2.0.
XBOX, MICROSOFT

Halo 3



Farewell, Blood Gulch; hello, Valhalla. Ingredients: one fleeing Mongoose, one Spartan laser. Directions: aim, charge, release and devastate. Repeat as necessary.
360, MICROSOFT

Something old, something new

What's to be gained from looking back?



In attempting to derive most of its entertainment value from nostalgic charm and gentle parody, *3D Dot Game Heroes* goes as far as making its simplistic mechanics part of the joke. It's a refreshing approach, but doesn't excuse poor design within those limitations

3*D Dot Game Heroes* plays like it's 20 years old. It's supposed to. Generally speaking, videogames are too concerned with relentlessly moving forward – upgrading, streamlining, overhauling – to indulge in something as backward-looking as homage. It's partially the result of industry cycles, which ensure that the possibilities offered by each new generation of hardware quickly obscure memories of the old, and partially a reflection of the medium's relative youth.

Whereas most games are closed systems, asking players to evaluate and judge them on their inherent qualities alone, *3DGH* is a nostalgia piece which asks to be viewed in a historical context that gamers unfamiliar with that bygone era, and the *Zelda* series in particular, will be entirely unable to appreciate. With this in mind, the game's limitations, such as the character models' handful of animation frames, become virtues – charming replications of their 20-year-old source. Furthermore, *3DGH*'s tone is one of deferential pastiche, knowingly excusing itself for predictability with references to the titles on which it's based. *Mega Man 10*, meanwhile, styles itself as a direct sequel to games from that era, without even the faintest hint of irony to soften the blow for players unaccustomed to the visuals and challenges of the period.

That videogames have a history rich enough for such titles to exist is a good thing, and a reflection of gaming's development. These games, however, also present their players with a conundrum: do we excuse archaic design because it's meant to be archaic? Or do we conclude that games, in some ways, really have moved on?

3DGH makes it easy by failing to live up to the quality of the series it's based on, but another recent title takes a more sly approach to parody. *Half-Minute Hero*, with its 30-second mini quests, manages to show affection for the genre it parodies even as it gleefully subverts its tropes, and in doing so manages to be a strangely modern nostalgic experience.

But still, *A Link To The Past* was released in 1991, and many claim it remains the finest title in the *Zelda* series. Perhaps, then, the most important lesson to bear in mind when plundering the past for today's titles is a simple one: bad design ages quickly, and great design never will.

Edge's scoring system explained:
1 = one, 2 = two, 3 = three, 4 = four, 5 = five, 6 = six, 7 = seven, 8 = eight, 9 = nine, 10 = ten

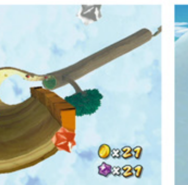


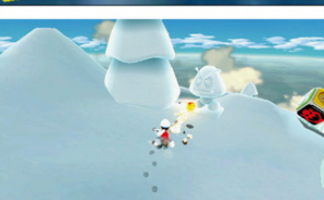
SUPER MARIO GALAXY 2

FORMAT: WII **RELEASE:** JUNE 11
PUBLISHER: NINTENDO **DEVELOPER:** IN-HOUSE
PREVIOUSLY IN: E204



Ghost houses continue to set new standards for level design, bringing platforms to life in little puddles of light, and with all manner of spatial challenges





You're going to take it for granted. And why not? Mario's titles always step lightly: they never undergo the rigorous pre-nup investigations most games sit through, and they're not sliced open and hyped up in studio visits, online documentaries and art team Q&As. With Mario, the work is hidden: he's pieced together in glorious secrecy, and nobody gets to see him until he's whole.

Besides, Nintendo makes it look so easy. An early level of *Super Mario Galaxy 2* leads you from a 360-degree playground, around a corner, and into the depths of a 2D maze, via a transition so effortless that you won't even notice it's happened. Coins guide the way and perfect distractions litter the path until, finally, a huge door opens in the wall behind you, beckoning you back to the world of three dimensions. Beyond it, there's a new route to follow, but now it hovers high above you, and it's upside-down.

These shifts in tempo, perspective and dynamics are things on which other games tend to choke. Here, they're thrown in for 20 minutes of one-shot fun. It's often a criticism to say that something is built from gimmicks, but the problem only actually arises the moment those gimmicks run out. In *Galaxy 2*'s case, they never do. This is a game that refuses to bore you, that can take you to the 60-star mark before asking you to do the same thing twice. It reuses assets, but almost never recycles ideas; you'll never see another title so thrifty, or so gratuitous.

Galaxy 2 is that rarest of things in Mario's universe: a traditional sequel. After years of running left to right, this is what happens when the plumber stops moving for a moment, before swooping in for another pass. It's no mere expansion: with the first blinding thrill of invention out of the way, it's an opportunity to see exactly what Nintendo has achieved. It's the platformer as playground, puzzle and toybox, as well as assault course, and the result will make you think about history just as its predecessor made you reconsider physics.

At times, it can be difficult to tell which Nintendo game is getting the sequel here. The plumber still leaps from planetoid to comet, moving from glass-shelled pill to carpeted travelator as he did two years ago, but these playgrounds ripple with echoes from Mario's early days, too. Throughout, Nintendo handles its busy traditions with poise, finding the best way to incorporate three decades of enemies, mechanics and audio cues, and always leaving room for a perfect twist. Most astonishingly, contemporary Mario still feels like his 8bit counterpart. A firm little chunk of fat, he's as approachable as ever, even as his moveset hits the levels of nuance more commonly found in fighting games.

Super Mario World is perhaps the



The Spaceship Mario hub and the map exist in an uneasy alliance, the game always dumping you back into the former, where there's pretty much nothing to do. It's a rare moment of friction in an experience that is otherwise so streamlined




The Cloud Suit offers something unexpected – a limited ability to plot your own course. It's perfect for use within confined spaces while, ever protective, the game continues to guide your eye with trinkets


Borrowing from venerable Mega Drive platformer *Quackshot*, eating a red pepper turns Yoshi into an unpredictable sports car. While he still runs in a panic if you're knocked out of the saddle, he now knows to stop at the edge of a platform



strongest secondary influence, and not just because the developers are more willing to explore 2D spaces this time. The map's back, helping to make design built on near-constant distraction seem both graceful and directed, and Yoshi also makes a welcome return. And, after *Sunshine*, it's the right Yoshi – the one that makes you feel super-powered but precarious all at once. Equipped with a pointer-based gobble attack that sends you tongue-swinging from one hook to the next, the dinosaur surreptitiously blends traversal with something that approaches a lightgun game – just one trick out of many in this restless, replayable universe.

Yoshi's transformative nature shines through in the other power-ups, almost all of which are built around mixing platforming with a different genre. Even in the early stages, the Drill turns levels into spatial puzzles while the Cloud Suit, allowing you to conjure a limited range of platforms, puts the focus on path-finding just as its rocky counterpart recalls the stunts and skittle-runs of both *Wii Sports* and *Metroid*. All mesh perfectly with their environments as the game swings you from the dusty outfields of the Spin-Dig Galaxy, through the dynamic candy-coloured terrors of somewhere like planet Puzzle Plank, where buzz-saws slice the floor to pieces around you, and out into the transdimensional strangeness of Haunted Halls, a skeletal ghost house that sets new standards for balancing intricacy and elegance.




Fail a level often enough and you'll be offered a ghostly guide to see you through to the finishing line in one piece. You'll have to be content with a Bronze Star, however


From the fourth map onwards, Galaxy 2 rarely drops you on to a platform that isn't sinking or melting. It's hard, but for the best reasons

All these worlds are yours, but some may take a while to claim. From the fourth map onwards, *Galaxy 2* ups the challenge, rarely dropping you on to a platform that isn't sinking or melting, or pitching you towards an incline that isn't heavy with massive rolling cogs. It's hard, but for the best reasons, earning the right to frustrate through the sheer quality of its ideas. The increased difficulty is merely a by-product of the new knots in which the designers want to tie your brain.

That desire to experiment is this astonishing game's most dangerous achievement. As the adventures soars onwards, its various spaces become increasingly warped, and the final levels switch the emphasis from perfecting the 3D platformer to deconstructing it. Mario is rubbing up against the limits of the form as much as the edge of the universe here, and you'll see worlds where ledges hang sparse in the air, and where ghosts plucked from the entire sweep of videogame history emerge in half-familiar clumpings of cubes or a nimble arrangement of switches.

Marvel at the pieces, but appreciate the whole. This isn't a game that redefines the genre: this is one that rolls it up and locks it away. We've come so far, from stepping on mushrooms to drop-kicking meteors into the heart of the sun; *Galaxy 2* offers a new understanding of where we've been, a new sense of wonder at where we'll go next. **[10]**

Out with the new



One of the stranger achievements of *Galaxy 2* is the way it manages to make *New Super Mario Bros Wii* look very simple-minded. The latest game never misses an opportunity to stick the plumber on a fixed plane, and from there it piles on the surprises, sending him wriggling through sumptuous palaces, or diving through knots of thick water hanging starkly in empty space. It's tempting to say the latest *Mario* has a better appreciation of co-op, too, in taking a cue from the first *Galaxy* by letting a friend help out on the Star Bits front with an additional Remote.

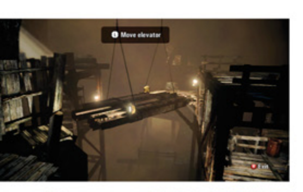


ALAN WAKE

FORMAT: 360 **RELEASE:** OUT NOW **PUBLISHER:** MICROSOFT
DEVELOPER: REMEDY **PREVIOUSLY IN:** E169, E204, E213



The dark powers that haunt Wake are creative when it comes to thinking up new ways to destroy him. Here, a combine harvester is roused from slumber to turn the writer and anyone else in its way into bales of blood and guts







Each episode begins with a daylight section. These not only show off the engine's spectacular draw distance but also allow the player an insight into writer Sam Lake's influences. The fictional Maine town of Bright Falls is particularly reminiscent of the setting for many of Stephen King's novels



Good versus evil. It's hardly an original starting point for an action game, but in *Alan Wake* the eternal tussle is literal. For starters, our hero uses a common flashlight to fight darkness made flesh. It's a crude metaphor, sure, but one that dovetails neatly with its writer protagonist and his pacey, no-nonsense pulp prose.

The resulting experience is in many ways as generic as the fiction from which it takes its cues. Five years in development, it's an action-focused spin on survival horror that fails to advance the formula beyond the five-year-old benchmark set by *Resident Evil 4*. At times it's hard not to notice the incremental changes effected during the game's protracted development period like the rings on a felled tree trunk. Sprawling forest environments and incongruous, empty driving sequences hint at the original open-world concept, and the frantic gathering and even more frantic replacement of batteries during the more intense encounters recalls the contrived tension of early survival horror games.

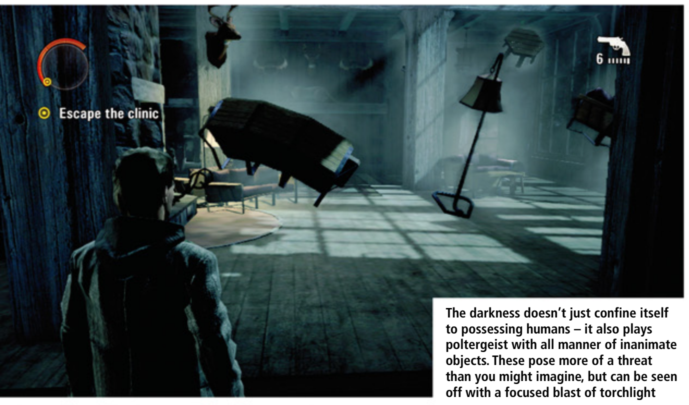
Wake may not quite be Stephen King, but it's his role as a storyteller that exerts the most control over the player, such is the cleverness of *Alan Wake*'s narrative structure. A thriller read in snatches that leap back and forth in time and hop from one narrator to the next, it's a structural sleight of hand that goes some way to distract the player from the A-to-B nature of its gameplay. It's a neat, non-linear way of telling a story in an essentially linear game.

> At its cleverest it plays with your expectations, and even embroiders them, in one of the cleverest scare tactics in recent horror game history

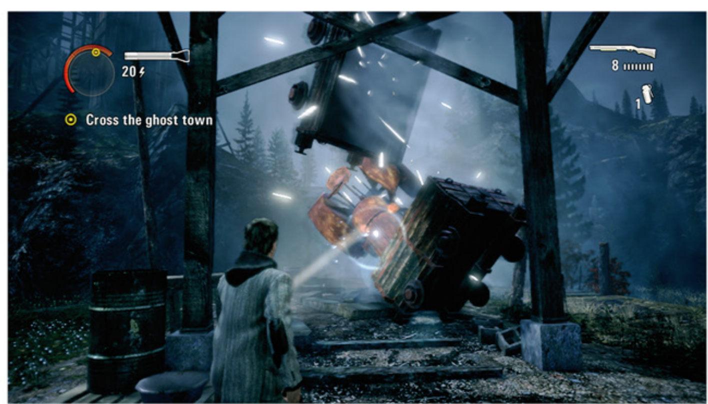
The drip feed of information, managed through the collection of scattered manuscript pages, fleshes out the tale effectively. More interestingly, it frequently drops hints of things to come. At its cleverest it plays with your expectations, and even embroiders them by confirming your worst fears of what's to come. Whether this is an astute psychological mind game or a cheeky nod to genre clichés is immaterial; it's one of the cleverest scare tactics in recent horror game history.

The trouble is, videogame storytelling has moved on significantly since Remedy began work on *Alan Wake*. In games such as *BioShock* and *Dead Space* information is relayed in voice recordings and videos within the context of the action, but to fully appreciate the narrative at work here demands regular dips into the menu to consume the story. Weirdly, each is read aloud by Wake. Quite why they don't play over the action automatically is a mystery worthy of anything the titular writer and his contemporaries could muster.

The entertaining, pyrotechnic combat plays second fiddle to the tension-and-release pattern of the narrative, contenting itself to reproduce a similar effect in microcosm. And it does so to great effect. Destroying enemies requires an initial dousing with a flashlight



The darkness doesn't just confine itself to possessing humans – it also plays poltergeist with all manner of inanimate objects. These pose more of a threat than you might imagine, but can be seen off with a focused blast of torchlight

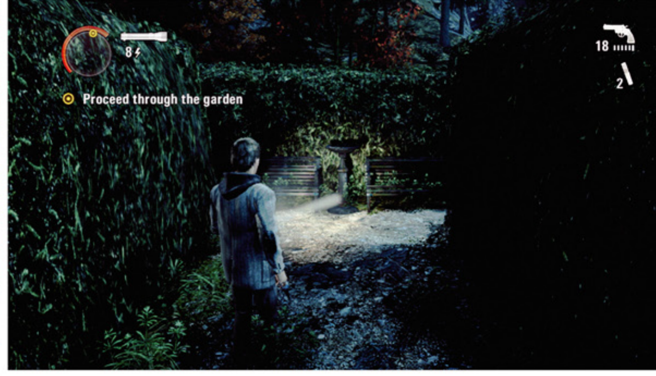






Pools of light provide protection from attackers and restore health. Sometimes Wake is required to supply the power by starting up a generator – leading to a tense QTE made even more tense by the sounds of pursuing enemies





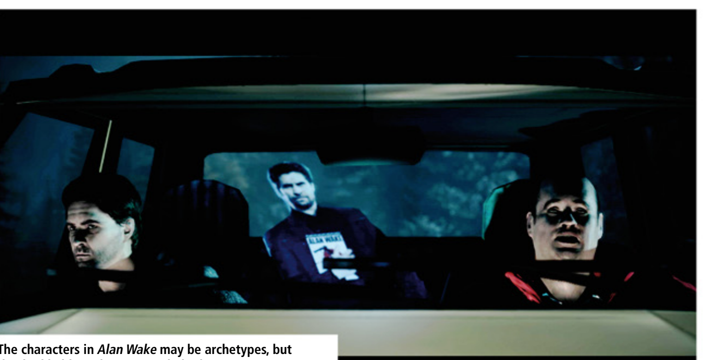
The hedge maze, a reliable staple of Gothic horror, makes for a particularly creepy set-piece here. As Wake negotiates its corridors the camera occasionally lurches backwards to reveal dark foes giving chase

beam or other light-emitting devices such as flares and floodlights. More intense battles expose Wake's limited abilities with firearms as well as a lack of melee attack and manoeuvrability, but in turn make for the most thrillingly demanding encounters. Carefully pushing back advancing hordes with the torch and setting up temporary safe zones with cunningly placed flares before selecting your next target proves meatily enjoyable. The shock and awe that results from the unlikely combo of a shotgun and a flashlight is equally exciting.

For the most part it works wonders. A tense ambush in a large tool shed forces you to use every trick in the book to keep the enemy at bay, never mind see them off. An unusual open-air stage sees rock concert pyrotechnics employed as weaponry to the strains of some suitably overblown heavy metal. A military-grade floodlight is employed as a gun turret to startling effect.

But while the plot moves with all the pace of a pulp paperback, the gameplay fails to keep pace. The solid combat struggles to develop beyond throwing more enemies at Wake, puzzles are rarely more than perfunctory, and the set-pieces only really set the pulse racing in the game's final hours. Later in the adventure, for instance, the darkness diversifies by possessing inanimate objects. Combine harvesters, monster trucks and, heck, even demonic parade floats are fine, but car tyres and oil drums? Even the use of light begins to run out of juice once all of the light-emitting weapons have been introduced, which happens early on.

Ultimately, *Alan Wake* is every bit as compulsive and satisfying as the fiction on which it riffs, but it also runs the risk of being equally forgettable. It's a game that delivers the requisite number of twists, turns and thrills, but the only real revelations take place on those scattered manuscript pages. As a franchise, *Alan Wake*'s future is assured – Remedy is already working on downloadable content and has plans for a sequel – but next time around the action will need to keep pace with the deft plotting. **[7]**



The characters in *Alan Wake* may be archetypes, but they're likable archetypes. Wake's abrasive agent Barry is a favourite, and his bizarre attachment to a cardboard cutout of the author provides a rich seam of comic relief

Horror shows

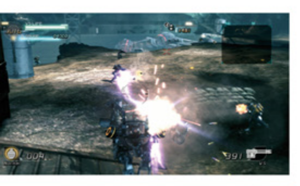


As in *Max Payne 2*, the medium of TV provides the game with the lion's share of Easter eggs. Fittingly, Bright Falls is gripped by a cult TV show to rival Twin Peaks. Entitled Night Springs, it's a dark Twilight Zone pastiche that plays out in live-action footage. The stories told range from unsettling to downright disturbing. A later episode in particular strikes a chord by revealing its protagonists to be the endangered creations of a writer suffering from a bad case of creative block.



LOST PLANET 2

FORMAT: 360 (VERSION TESTED), PS3 RELEASE: OUT NOW
PUBLISHER: CAPCOM DEVELOPER: IN-HOUSE
PREVIOUSLY IN: E203, E204, E208, E213





Vital Suits come in many shapes and sizes, the browniest of which allows for two passengers to hitch a ride

Odds are, there's a good time to be had with *Lost Planet 2*. Those odds depend heavily on whether you're playing alone or with friends, and what role the house plays. A roll of the dice in singleplayer might bring the thrill of a Category G Akrid boss battle, rendered to a standard that would make Hollywood jealous. Or it may leave you flummoxed and frustrated by an oversight as simple as the camera position in episode five's desert assault, or the sluggish calibration of episode three's train-mounted cannon.

The inconsistent campaign mode certainly makes for variety, but it's not all built around the core mechanics inherited from the original. Gone are the dripping caves of barren EDN III, replaced by oil rigs and industrial habitats that crowd visibility and highlight the inadequacy of the AI opponents. There are faint shivers of *Extreme Condition*'s otherworldly displacement in the opening act, but it's quickly purged by an overactive adrenal gland and a determination to cover as much genre ground as possible.

Extreme Condition's campaign was pest control from the cockpit of some seriously heavy metal, so it's a shame to see that here those shooting-gallery instincts are suffocated by needless tinkering. In trying to spice up the control system of the original, a closer relative to *GunValkyrie* than *Gears Of War*, Capcom has inadvertently broken what didn't need fixing, leading to battles that stutter rather than flow. For every plus of *Extreme Condition*'s template, *Lost Planet 2* introduces a minus in its bid to mimic the competition. The roadie run may provide momentum, but it's undercut by the lack of a vault or cover mechanic. The grappling hook is nixed by the absence of a ledge-grab, now cried out for by base assaults and train-hopping run-downs. There's also no attempt to remedy some of *Extreme Condition*'s flaws: the time it takes to recover from the blast wave of an explosion is still excessive and mid-air grappling hooks are still forbidden.



The arsenal is fully loaded, offering handgun, shotgun and rifle alongside riot-controlling grenades and rocket launchers



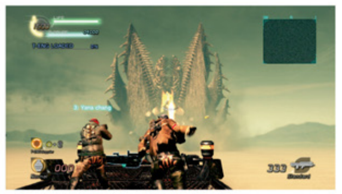


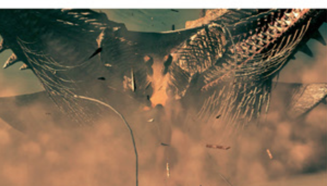
The mini-gun is one of the more satisfying in the arsenal, packing a tremendous punch regardless of range. When mounted on a VS, where it belongs, it's even deadlier

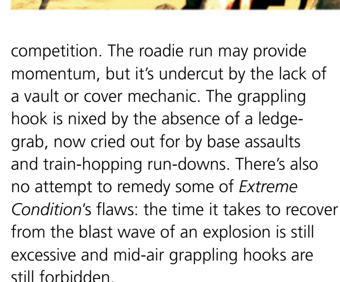


If the six episodes – divided into bite-sized areas for high-score incentives – lack balance, the same criticism can't be levelled at the armoury. The arsenal is fully loaded, offering the trinity of handgun, shotgun and rifle alongside riot-controlling grenades and rocket launchers, ideal for fending off an incoming Vital Suit. Keeping the scales balanced in multiplayer with the variable of the Vital Suits is no mean feat, and it's testament to Capcom's vision for the project as an arena-based brawler that care and









Episode three opens with a magnificent showdown in a desert village that provides a perfect mix of cover and open areas – a balance other missions should have learned from. The train assault that follows is a claustrophobic affair that ranges from thrilling to infuriating as you battle to keep the train in one piece, and your squad alive





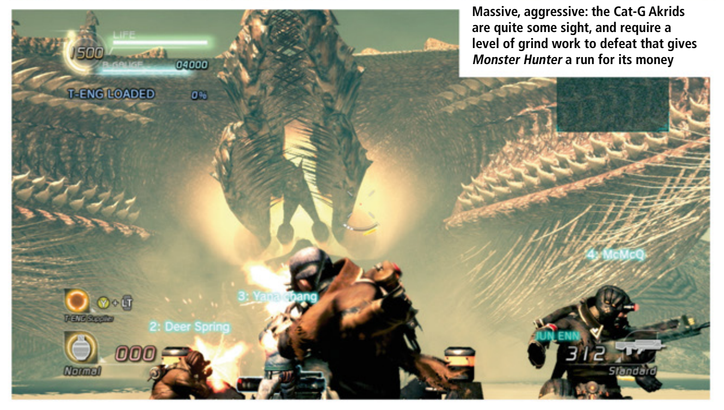
Costume customisation, funded by campaign progress, can lead to some interesting ensembles. Akrids will maul you regardless of your natty dress sense



You'll divide your time in the campaign between slaying Akrids and battling mobile armour divisions. The enemy AI, luckily, isn't as advanced as the armour







Massive, aggressive: the Cat-G Akrids are quite some sight, and require a level of grind work to defeat that gives *Monster Hunter* a run for its money

consideration have been given to providing escape routes for those who are outgunned. The spectrum of customisable options and commands all contribute to a sense of control over matches that is empowering and almost single-handedly pulls *Lost Planet 2* from the flames. The addition of self-healing (providing you have the energy stored up) and distribution of health as a projectile are deft touches that keep team games fast and sustained. Battle Armour adds a ferocious bite to attack power, offset by a lack of manoeuvrability, and pulse grenades deliver a debilitating blow that buys crucial time in the charge towards Data Posts.

If Vital Suits are the currency of *Lost Planet 2*, then Data Posts are the merchandise. Spawn-point rewards and the keys to map domination, they're at the top of your agenda in both single- and multiplayer. In singleplayer, they double as checkpoints, offering unlimited respawns and acting as the objective for the majority of areas. This central conceit softens some of the risk/reward of the less-forgiving sections (a sea-bed shootout springs to mind) and allows solo players to conquer some of the denser set-pieces by repetition, if not skill. It's a shame your AI comrades haven't been adequately trained, their path-finding dictated by your own route, and initiative a word seemingly absent from their vocabularies. It'll be seconds before you hit restart in order to switch off friendly fire, a protective measure for your AI buddies' skulls as much as your own conscience. Transport vehicles come into their own in multiplayer, but feel heavily at odds with singleplayer level design, further reinforcing the tailoring of *Lost Planet 2* towards online sensibilities.

In trying to transpose *Lost Planet*'s distinctive control method and old-school thrills into ambitious online play, the series has placed itself in danger of alienating its original fans and confusing newcomers. There's no denying the variety or density of the package, but it's an uneven one that aims high and often falls short. At its best it's an engaging spectacle, but when it falters *Lost Planet 2* is a gamble that doesn't pay off. **[6]**

A long time ago...



The attempts made to tell the story of EDN III's tribal warfare in cutscenes are as bombastic, well choreographed and gravity-defying as any in Capcom's canon, which makes their irrelevance to the overall experience even more disappointing. Without the 'hero's journey' plotline, it's difficult to care about the factions of *Lost Planet 2* or their battle for domination. It doesn't help that the game is so derivative of other sources: the debt owed to George Lucas is especially huge, with shades of Endor, Hoth and Tatooine all threaded into the tapestry of EDN III's scenarios.



SPLIT SECOND: VELOCITY

FORMAT: 360 (VERSION TESTED), PC, PS3
RELEASE: MAY 21 **PUBLISHER:** DISNEY INTERACTIVE STUDIOS
DEVELOPER: BLACK ROCK STUDIOS **PREVIOUSLY IN:** E204, E211







Route changes genuinely transform the path of the circuit, but as an offensive measure they are rarely as effective as a standard Power Play. Still, they are a welcome distraction for lonely leaders



Games have long been criticised for expending far too much energy attempting to emulate cinema rather than growing within their own form. Whether that stems from restricted interactivity, an over-reliance on cutscenes to deliver narrative or simply the ever-escalating graphical arms race that mirrors the astonishing amounts spent on Hollywood special effects budgets, many people are frustrated that a non-interactive medium informs so much of game development. Traditionally, though, this accusation has rarely been levelled at the racing genre – a series of consecutive races is perhaps far enough removed from traditional narrative that reliance on cinematic tropes is more challenging.

While *Split Second: Velocity*'s central conceit is based around a reality television show, it is a game that benefits by being directly and unashamedly inspired by cinema. Rather than inheriting a series of rules ill-suited to interactivity, Black Rock has cribbed a Hollywood convention – carefully choreographed pyrotechnics – that works in context . In *Split Second* you aren't racing in a realistic environment, you are negotiating a live set, rigged with enough explosives to raze a small town. The result is an experience that feels dramatic because it is meticulously controlled, as opposed to the unpredictable blend of physics, static course design and AI that provides the action in most racers.

> In Split Second you aren't racing in a realistic environment, you are negotiating a live set, rigged with enough explosives to raze a small town

Scraping your way through Power Plays (offensive set-pieces triggered by the race's participants) is an experience that is reminiscent of darting through cross-traffic in *Burnout*. There are no blue shells in *Split Second,* and with the aid of quick reactions, driving finesse, forward planning or a combination of the three, all of the Power Plays can be evaded successfully. There's more variety in their effectiveness, too: even if an opponent isn't hit with the full force of a Power Play, the blast wave will usually pitch the car into a series of pendulum-effect slides from which it costs time to recover.

It's a gimmick, but one that remains interesting for as long as there are new circuits to unlock and fresh Power Plays to be witnessed. Naturally, the Super Power Plays steal the show, usually involving the demolition of an edifice that has the potential to flatten several opponents or bring about a profound change in the route of the course. Such special events are beautifully timed, either as a chain reaction that follows the pack or as a lengthy effect that begins when you're far enough away to appreciate its scale, and very few are anything less than spectacular. Two feel like afterthoughts, but are no less enjoyable because of it.





Split Second's drifting mechanic sits somewhere between *Burnout* and *OutRun*, and barring a few frustrating missteps the circuits are designed to perfectly accommodate outlandish powerslides



Occasionally, during the Dominator events, players are forced out of their comfort zone with a vehicle that is the very definition of its class. After a sustained period in an Exotic class car, a truck feels positively leaden in comparison



Scale is the factor that separates Super Power Plays from their standard stablemates. All of the game's Power Plays can be used on multiple victims





But while *Split Second: Velocity*'s fireworks are aesthetically pleasing and an entirely satisfying way of eliminating opponents, there are surprisingly few options for strategy when it comes to their deployment, which raises concerns over the game's longevity. Essentially, your only decision is whether to save your three-stage power bar for a Super Power Play or deploy the standard attacks as soon as you are capable. In practice, though, it's almost always advantageous to simply hammer the standard Power Play button in Pavlovian response to the icon appearing by an opponent. Defensive options are ignored – none of the Power Plays can be used against chasing opponents, so taking the lead becomes a breakneck nightmare directed by Michael Bay as you attempt to negotiate bombardment from the rest of the pack. It's a terrifying and exhilarating experience, but it'd be interesting to see canny players given at least some chance to mitigate the effects with any accumulated power.

Survivor mode challenges players to overtake a series of juggernauts that are shedding exploding barrels across the course. In order to retain your combo you need to pass the trucks without colliding with the





While the physics are questionable, a chopper hauling an aircraft fuselage or dump truck across the circuit is one of the more challenging Power Plays to avoid, especially when the helicopter itself becomes part of the carnage

red-coloured hazards they drop in your path, resulting in a score-chasing diversion built with an arcade-style purity. Air Strike and Air Strike Revenge both offer similar challenges, but their assaults come from an attack helicopter which launches guided missiles at specific spots on the asphalt – only via careful weaving and precision drifts will you avoid being converted into so much molten slag.

More focused is Dominator mode, the other standout event type, which presents a single hot lap of a circuit as a series of Power Plays automatically activate. It's the logical conclusion to *Split Second*'s heavily scripted pyrotechnics, but the game is careful not to show its hand until you've repeated the circuit several times in standard race modes. While it might seem exactly the same as heading up the pack in a single race, the inclusion of some semblance of pacing on the part of the developer grants players precious fractions of a second to perform considered heroics rather than simply careening from one shockwave to the next.

Ultimately, much like a summer movie blockbuster, *Split Second* offers thrills galore, but there's a hint of glossy superficiality to it, too. Large-scale explosions distract from a lack of tactical depth for a while, but the game's lifespan would have been improved, particularly as far as multiplayer is concerned, with a more comprehensively involving strategic element. Yet there are few games in the genre that create quite so many sharp intakes of breath and instances of unintentionally barked profanity as this one, and sometimes that's what racing gaming is all about. **[8]**

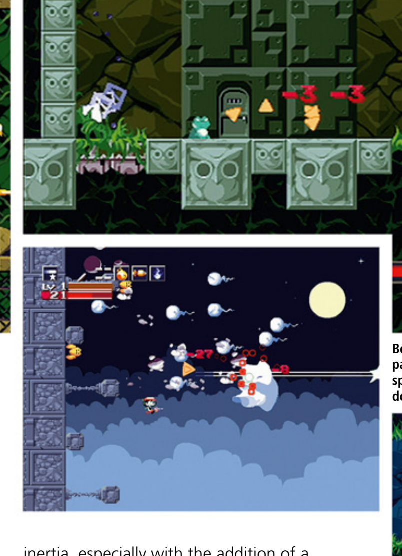
Car pool

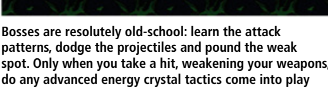


Vehicles are broadly split into three groups: fast but lightweight exotics, hefty trucks, and muscle cars which sit somewhere in between. Heavier cars are naturally less unsettled by the effects of Power Plays but usually suffer from compromised top speed and handling. Even the early cars are relatively quick compared to other racers, but bizarrely the handling runs the entire gamut between uncontrollable oversteer to unmanageable understeer. In general the muscle cars strike the best balance, though they have their own individual stats that profoundly affect how they drive. Find a car that perfectly complements your abilities and there are opportunities for some truly outrageous powerslides.

Mostly workable, the itty-bitty visual style can grow confused in frantic showdowns. Caught in a cloud of projectiles, enemies, bits of enemies and energy crystals, you can only pray to make it out alive







Bosses are resolutely old-school: learn the attack patterns, dodge the projectiles and pound the weak spot. Only when you take a hit, weakening your weapons, do any advanced energy crystal tactics come into play



There are a few equipment choices to make along the way. Characters offer to upgrade and swap certain weapons – holding off, and persevering with a weaker variety, often leads to something better down the line

CAVE STORY

FORMAT: WII **RELEASE:** OUT NOW
PUBLISHER: NICALIS **DEVELOPER:** STUDIO PIXEL

Released in 2004, *Cave Story* was an indie hit, a freeware action-adventure designed and developed solely by Japanese creator Daisuke Amaya. No longer free, following six years of countless indie innovation, and incubated by a third party, the game finds itself on WiiWare unable to make so many bold claims. With this in mind, is it still relevant?

Mechanically, certainly. Amaya's influences are many and largely lived up to. Exploring a series of interconnected subterranean areas, play mimics *Metroid* or *Castlevania* filtered through *Spelunker*. Health tanks and missile expansions supply the *Metroid*, stat-driven weapons the *Castlevania*. Armed with a jump and an ever-growing arsenal, our robot hero Quote is a far more animated presence than Samus or Belmont, the action sharing the immediacy of a run-and-gunner, with bright blocky projectiles tearing through hectic hordes of Amaya's distinctive pixel goons.

Though only a tiny fleck on the screen, Quote has a perfect blend of nimbleness and inertia, especially with the addition of a jetpack. His physical dexterity is matched by the combat's strategic considerations. Weapons are upgraded with crystals from dispatched enemies and weakened when Quote takes a hit; thus begins a juggling routine, balancing the usefulness of charged weapons against the desire to strengthen others. Bosses – echoing Treasure's at their pixel-manipulating best – are particularly taut encounters, as projectile waves carve through both health and weapons alike.

Although a short affair – albeit with a horrendously nasty sting in the tail for those determined to see all the endings – *Cave Story* works better in short bursts. Powerful weapons appear early on and with careful management of crystals (or cheap grinding) can overpower most of what falls between boss encounters, turning *Cave Story* into more of a *Cave Genocide*. And with powered-up machine-gun fire propelling Quote into the air, many of the platforming sections are obsolete for the judicious player. The excitement of the initial flurry of powers doesn't return until those bitter final stages.

With its debt to 8bit days (albeit with sprinklings of 16bit flavouring), *Cave Story* is an unsurprisingly snug fit on the Wii. A horizontally held Remote mimics the NES joypad Quote so obviously yearns to be controlled by, and chunky pixel landscapes and pop-up character art sit easily on TV screens alongside any Virtual Console library. What felt like a charming retro throwback on the PC monitor could be the real thing in the context of the living room television – the great NES game lost for 20 years down the back of the sofa. And you don't even have to blow into the cart.

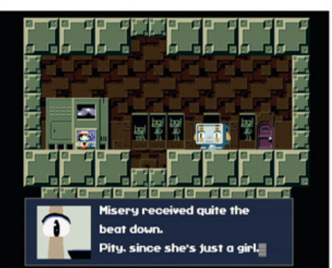
That's not to say that this is a throwback to the stinginess of olden days. Nicalis works for its 1,200 points with an overhaul à la *Monkey Island: Special Edition*, with blocky sprites smoothed and the infectious chiptune soundtrack remastered. As in *Monkey Island*, the original assets are included for stubborn acolytes, but either way, Ayama's style has that charming timelessness inherent in the best pixel art – think *EarthBound* or *Pokémon*. From Quote's own marshmallow face to armies of turquoise space hoppers to the iconic (and moronic) toaster miniboss Balrog, *Cave Story* is a visual delight.

Add to this a selection of new modes (see 'Brace yourselves') and we find ourselves in the company of *Cave Story: The Collector's Edition*. The darling of the indie scene for so many years, it's a pleasure to see the game proving itself all over again. **[8]**

Brace yourselves



A second playable character appears in the form of Curly Brace, Quote's female robo-companion. A simple texture swap as opposed to a mechanical overhaul, Studio Pixel at least adjusts all the dialogue for her travels – enough of an incentive to replay for more fervent fans. Of greater interest to the newcomer are a handful of difficulty modes, either weakening enemies for beginners or removing the health-bar-extending life capsules for those with a suicidal streak. Only true masochists will appreciate the Sanctuary time trial – a sprint through *Cave Story*'s most lethal environment. We struggled to progress unhindered by the bounds of time, let alone with the clock ticking. You have been warned.



Balrog appears throughout to challenge Quote to a series of increasingly odd duels. He's a favourite with fans, who'll be saddened to discover that his signature cry of "Huzzah!" has been swapped for "Oh yeah!"







WARIOWARE: DO IT YOURSELF

FORMAT: DS RELEASE: OUT NOW PUBLISHER: NINTENDO
DEVELOPER: INTELLIGENT SYSTEMS

Hit nail! Poke dog! Stomp badger! In *WarioWare* you're never more than a verb away from a finished concept, making it the perfect candidate for a user-generated outing. Only a few seconds long, the microgame is an ideal entry point for budding developers. An idea is formed, the art assets drawn and the code written in under an hour. A quick chuckle as you play, and on to the next.

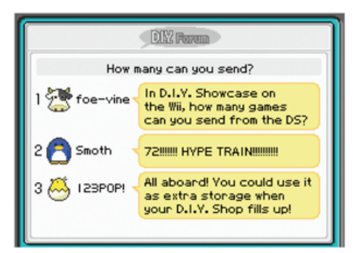
Interestingly, where console-based creation kits like *LittleBigPlanet* or Kodu tend to disguise development tools as playful sandboxes, Intelligent Systems is surprisingly frank about the whole thing. Art assets are art assets and AI routines are AI routines. Wario is never far away to hijack a tutorial, and menu scrollbars are replaced with abseiling ninjas, but these are minor blotches of silliness on Nintendo's otherwise sensible presentation. Bar a painting interface echoing that of Mario Paint, the tools are very clean, very precise, not very Wario.

In fact, their one indulgence – a series of tutorials with teaching assistance from Wario – is the most irritating part of the package. Wario butts in on mandatory lessons given on drawing, music creation and programming, claiming he doesn't understand. Nintendo's localisation team has not lost its ear for the wacky dialogue heard in the *Mario RPG* games, but perhaps it has become *too* aware of it, such is the volume of Wario's interruptions that his ramblings can obscure the lesson. Harassing Penny, the teacher, Wario causes her to lose her place and the class along with her. It's a rare example of Nintendo user-unfriendliness.

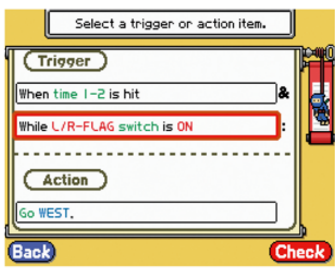
Persevering through the lessons grants access to the more beneficial dojo. Here, lines of code are added to complete half-finished microgames. Whether triggering celebratory confetti when win conditions are met or manipulating invisible switches and triggers, these micro-lessons encourage learning by doing, neatly disguising the whole process as a puzzle. Even better is rooting around in the guts of the packaged games and seeing how Intelligent Systems made them (every game was created using the tools). What effects aren't taught can be stolen (as can art assets, for the sloppy of hand) and, in some cases, improved upon. Attempting to better Yoshio Sakamoto's own *Metroid* microgame is a fun challenge.

Games are limited to tap inputs, and while this restricts the packaged games (as a standalone singleplayer experience, *DIY* is weak), it makes for a more workable production line. Constraining input to basic prods actually bullies creative thinking. With no direct means of controlling moving objects, players are encouraged to find ways of adding motion to otherwise static offerings. What begins with taps to send a ladybird scurrying off can soon evolve into side-scrolling platformers or even using an onscreen D-pad to steer objects around. To prove the versatility, Nintendo has enlisted indie talent – 2D Boy, Gaijin Games, Daisuke Amaya – to design microgame versions of their own works. Available to download, they are testament to *DIY*'s potential.

Developer input aside, *WarioWare*'s online scene is far from satisfactory. Friend codes keep your developer circle tight, and that only two games can be uploaded at any time seems overly fussy for four seconds of gaming. *WarioWare* begs for an online space along the lines of DSi's Flipnote Studio where users can upload and download at will, improving on other works and seeing their own blossom under another's watchful eye. Yes, YouTube's vast, expanding catalogue of microgame recordings inevitably reveals the grubbiness from which Nintendo is trying to protect youngsters, but it seems a shame. For those of us with purer nail-hitting, dog-poking and badger-stomping in mind, the pleasure will have to remain in the doing. **[8]**
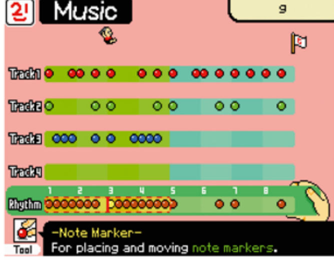


A fake in-game forum gradually unfolds with advanced tutorials disguised as mindless online banter. Nintendo's localisation team has a frightening ear for the real thing – we were one Picard.jpg short of falling for it



Four-panel comics can also be made, but the real treat lies in reading the baffling pre-made offerings. Drawn by top Japanese manga talent they cover everything from rubbish detectives to melancholic pudding. All coding is built around a simple trigger/action system, with instructions crafted from clearly defined strings of verbs. Onscreen icons even demonstrate the motions you're selecting. It's hard not to make a masterpiece





Music creation scores microgames and works as a standalone record maker. The number of YouTube videos still milking mileage from Mario Paint's similar setup is testament to the appeal of self-penned bloopy synth

Big brother



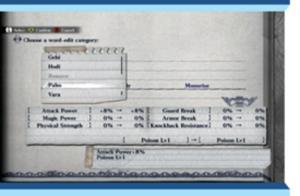
The game launched alongside a WiiWare channel entitled WarioWare Do It Yourself Showcase. As the title suggests, it's all about observation. The creator elements are not included, but there are 72 new microgames, comics and records. As in the DS version, new games can be downloaded, including the 'big name games' (designed by notable industry figures) and the winners of design challenges set for DS owners. Best of all is the chance for DS designers to upload their games straight to Wii and see them displayed on the television screen. Considering most microgames tend to lean towards ridiculing/maiming friends, it's far more fun to broadcast them to the intended audience. If the DS scene was only a little bit more open, Showcase would be the perfect window into the madness.



NIER

FORMAT: 360, PS3 RELEASE: OUT NOW PUBLISHER: SQUARE ENIX
DEVELOPER: CAVIA PREVIOUSLY IN: E212

Bound over



Grimoire Weiss is your constant companion and sidearm. A magic floating tome, it acts as inventory, offensive weapon and curmudgeonly pal – allowing you to fiddle with word enchantments or summon heat-seeking missiles. Woven into almost everything you do in-game, Weiss is a great creation, although its 'subversive' personality can go a bit too far – you'll do more than your fair share of rubbish fetch quests in *Nier*, and having a sarcastic book hovering over your shoulder and pointing out how lousy they are doesn't help.

Nier isn't one game, but several, its RPG trunk supporting attempts at everything from bullet hell to *Harvest Moon* and *Bayonetta*. Its grimly emo aesthetics suggest genre-by-numbers, but there are surprises even here – though it never quite escapes the whiff of the B-list. It's a patchwork of old standards, mechanics transplanted from other genres, and countless sidequests.

The game's huge and complex, but its major problem is endemic and simple: it lacks polish. Every interaction is just about good enough, but nothing's exceptional. Exhibit A: the combat system's thirdperson brawling that aims to mix and match physical attacks with magic. It's fun, but never takes off – the interplay just isn't fluid enough. You can almost hear the gears creaking as you tap the magic button. The absence of a lock-on is baffling, particularly when the enemies get tougher and more numerous, and though there's subtlety to *Nier*'s combat you won't know about half of it without real effort. The tutorials barely deserve the label, accessed as they are via a sub-menu and lumped together as two-line memos.

Let's get the other bad things out of the way. The sidequests are truly poor, almost all involving going to fetch X number of item Y, killing something, or both. It's deadening. You can grow seeds, watering them and harvesting the proceeds. Why bother? The fishing minigame, meanwhile, is forgettable. You do these activities for cash, but get the best items for free anyway. Mind-boggling.

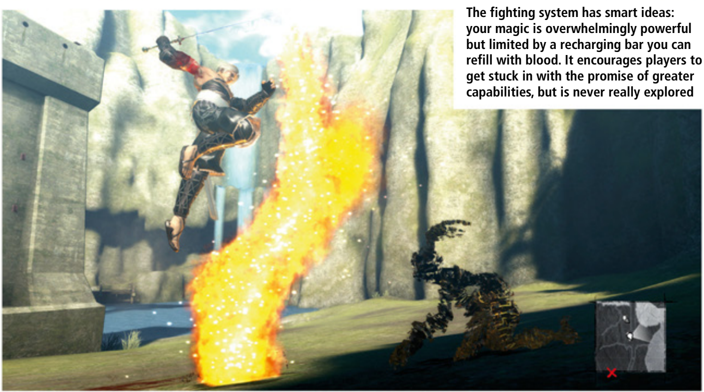
The get-out clause? You can ignore all of this stuff and barrel through the story – the cash is useless anyway, and *Nier* levels up quickly enough. Freed from a barrage of pointless distractions, the game's main quest is a *Zelda*-ish dungeon RPG, a succession of labyrinths, bosses and downtime that keeps powering you up and pulling you onwards.

It redeems the package somewhat. The environments can be dull, but *Nier*'s landmarks are often awesome in design and size, tempting thoughts of Team Ico and making you wonder why the whole game isn't like this. Grand old temples with rotting insides, bloom-saturated rotundas and crumbling masonry are *Nier*'s highlights, settings for action that never quite lives up to the promise.

A note on the bosses, though: their size, occasional ferocity and the unusual touch of their patterned bullet attacks makes each victory a memorable one. The 'bullet hell' isn't quite what it looks like: you whack them or guard with magic rather than diving through gaps or desperately zigzagging. That said, it's something of a new idea and, typical *Nier*, just a few adjustments away from being a great one – particularly as you progress and individual bullets become much deadlier.

As for the quest itself, there's an unexpected touch of the tragic, and the bizarre members of your party make up for the limp supporting cast. Even Tecmo would blush at Kaine, a hermaphrodite who's totally naked barring what might have once been a corset. She also has a bad case of potty mouth, which would be rather wearing if she weren't winningly paired off against a medieval book that talks like Alan Rickman (see 'Bound over').

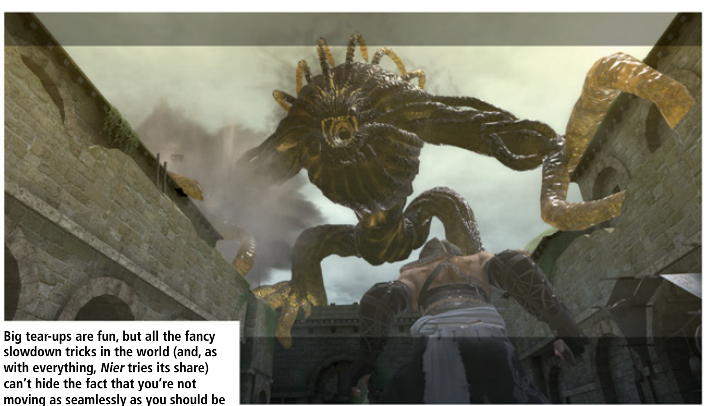
So, if *Nier* is several games, unfortunately only one of them is any good – and even then it's not wholly convincing. You can call it feature creep or over-ambition, but it's the surfeit of content that almost buries the game's achievements. And it means that even though *Nier* desperately wants to be a great game, and has ideas about how to do it, ultimately it's just flailing in that general direction. **[6]**



The fighting system has smart ideas: your magic is overwhelmingly powerful but limited by a recharging bar you can refill with blood. It encourages players to get stuck in with the promise of greater capabilities, but is never really explored







Big tear-ups are fun, but all the fancy slowdown tricks in the world (and, as with everything, *Nier* tries its share) can't hide the fact that you're not moving as seamlessly as you should be



SKATE 3

FORMAT: 360, PS3 (VERSION TESTED) RELEASE: OUT NOW PUBLISHER: EA
DEVELOPER: EA BLACK BOX PREVIOUSLY IN: E210, E214

The development of *Skate 3* almost certainly overlapped with that of the over-ambitious, under-articulate *Tony Hawk: Ride* (unless the latter was made in a few weeks, which judging from its quality is not impossible). The reaction of *Skate 3* to news of its competitor's plastic novelty – the ability, or rather obligation, to play the game with a skateboard-shaped peripheral – shows exactly why EA's series snatched top spot from *Hawk* in the first place. There is no tit-for-tat in *Skate 3*, no marketable hook or addition of a hero. Instead there's refinement to an already rewarding, realistic system.

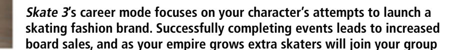


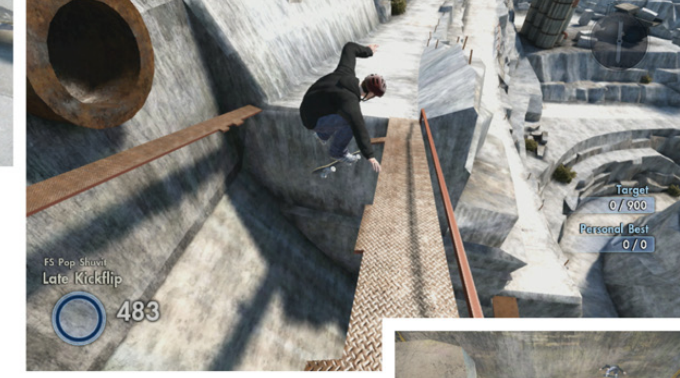
That system is based around the Flick-it controls, which intuitively map the actions and movement of skateboard tricks to the controller. The system centres on the right stick, which is flicked like the board itself (down then up for an ollie, with different angles and half-circles to mimic more complex tricks). *Skate 2* saw a substantial addition in the form of face and shoulder buttons representing individual limbs pressed to modify tricks, but this time, aside from the inclusion of darkslides and underflips, it remains virtually unchanged.

This decision was probably taken for two reasons – first, because the system is very good anyway, and second, because it's also really hard. It's deep, occasionally frustrating and demands accuracy and patience. And this is reflected in the changes which *have* been made – the additional of a noob-friendly 'you-know-me-from-TV' tutorial with pro skater/comedy actor Jason Lee, a trick analyser which appears onscreen and displays exactly what shape you're making with your right stick movements (prepare to be disappointed), and variable difficulty settings (although the only real difference between them seems to be how magically your skater transitions into grinds).

This leaves *Skate 3* a balance of two extremes – a tough kernel of gameplay, padded by conscientiously accessible presentation. In contrast to *Burnout Paradise*, another of EA's open-world playgrounds, everything here is instant. Players can teleport across the new city of Port Carveton (which represents the most substantial piece of fresh content in the game), summon alternative skaters to play with, and construct their own skate parks using drag-and-drop controls. This can be bewildering – a great number of events and options are thrust upon the player and the flat story does little to guide them through – though it's preferable to slow-release.

And this is *Skate 3* all over – balanced and refined, and a smart sequel for it. But while refinement might be the best way to make a good game better, it certainly isn't the best way to justify the cost of a second sequel in as many years. New city aside, *Skate 3* struggles to differentiate itself from its immediate predecessor, which takes away a little of its lustre. **[7]**


Skate 3's career mode focuses on your character's attempts to launch a skating fashion brand. Successfully completing events leads to increased board sales, and as your empire grows extra skaters will join your group



As ever, skating is as much about looking cool as it is about technical proficiency. *Skate 3* has a in-depth video and picture editor with which players can frame, cut and add effects to recordings of their exploits, before uploading to the web

Alongside the regular events – street competitions, races, face-offs with pro skaters – the masochistic Hall of Meat returns, with players bailing from their board in spectacular falls and aiming to break as many bones as possible

New port



After the clamped streets of *Skate 2*'s San Vanelona – full of security guards and capped, anti-board rails – *Skate 3* presents us with an entirely new city called Port Carveton. In line with the game's open-access approach, this is a skater's paradise, in which the security guards offer style tips and every location is packed with smooth, skateable curves and grindable edges. It doesn't pose the same hostile challenge as San Vanelona, but for creating long, satisfying skating lines, this is a big step up the property ladder.


12
www.pegi.info
START DOWNLOADING
HUNDREDS OF MOVIES
WITH THE
PLAYSTATION®NETWORK
VIDEO STORE
PlayStation Network
THE GAME IS JUST THE START
Why go out for a great movie when you can download it? The PlayStation®Network Video Store gives you the latest, greatest movies from Hollywood and beyond, straight to your living room, at the click of a button. Start getting the movie you want, when you want with PlayStation®3.
DATE: RIGHT NOW SHOWING AT: YOUR HOUSE ADMIT ONE
5
0
R3
The Hangover. Inglourious Basterds. Star Trek. Public Enemies. Terminator Salvation. Harry Potter and the Half-Blood Prince™. Now available on the PlayStation®Network Video Store.
PS3
PlayStation 3
PlayStation® Store
SONY
make.believe
"PlayStation", "PLAYSTATION", "PS3" and "ΔOXO" are registered trademarks of Sony Computer Entertainment Inc. is a registered trademark of Sony Corporation. "SONY" and "make.believe" are trademarks of the Sony Corporation. Inglourious Basterds © The Weinstein Company, 2009. All Rights reserved. The Hangover © 2009 Warner Bros. Entertainment Inc. All rights reserved. Star Trek © 2009 Paramount Pictures. STAR TREK and related marks and logos are trademarks of CBS Studios Inc. All Rights Reserved. HARRY POTTER characters, names and related indicia are trademarks of and © Warner Bros. Ent. All Rights Reserved. Ent. Public Enemies © 2009 Universal Studios. All Rights Reserved. Terminator Salvation © 2009 T Asset Acquisition Company, LLC. All Rights Reserved. "Broadband internet service required. Users are responsible for broadband access fees. Charges apply for some content. PlayStation®Network and PlayStation®Store subject to terms of use and not available in all countries and languages. Users under 18 require parental consent.



The environments are clean but evocative, their clarity bringing to mind the likes of *Team Fortress 2*. The characters aren't as charismatic as those of Valve's game, however





LEAD AND GOLD: GANGS OF THE WILD WEST

FORMAT: 360, PC (VERSION TESTED), PS3 **RELEASE:** OUT NOW
PUBLISHER: PARADOX INTERACTIVE **DEVELOPER:** FATSHARK

It's a neat fit Fatshark has found here. The same design in this team-based multiplayer shooter that lends itself to a rootin'-tootin' cowboy game – broad crosshairs and a thirdperson camera that puts the emphasis firmly on tactical bodily movement instead of just razor-sharp marksmanship – also makes *Lead And Gold* perfectly suitable for both mice and pads.

With three of the game's four classes struggling to hit barn doors from 40 paces, the resulting combat is thoughtful and dramatic, if a touch brash. The need to close in on your opponents and get the drop on them means there's a pleasing amount of dashing forward, flanking and retreating, with plenty of room for murderous ambushes. With only one class, the dynamite-wielding Blaster, capable of either indirect or explosive attacks, one of the best examples of teamwork you'll see in *Lead And Gold* is a few boys lounging in an alleyway or around an objective, waiting patiently for a chance to brutally outgun the opposition.

This is also where *Lead And Gold*'s strangest innovation can be found. Players of different classes give teammates in their vicinity a small stat boost that varies by class. Blasters give friends an armour boost, the all-rounder Gunslinger increases accuracy, and so on. Players who stick together also gain slow health regeneration, and can help fallen players back up, *Gears Of War* style.

Yet while *Gears*' cover system, slow movement and melee combat always accommodates players fighting in close proximity, in *Lead And Gold* sticking close to your friends can make things more scrappy. Groups often end up jinking back and forth in vague, nonsensical clusters, overwhelming any lone wolves who stumble across them after disappointingly quick firefights.



The Gunslinger's rapid-fire fanning ability (above) could be the best part of *Lead And Gold*: sending out a quick, inaccurate storm of projectiles with a flurry of desperate clicks is hugely satisfying. Carrying your team's respawn flag (left) means anyone on your side can spawn a scant 12 feet away from you. It's a nice idea balanced by the moments when you're duelling with a flag-carrier and get shot in the back by his teleporting backup

Really, it's *Lead And Gold*'s odd restriction of movement that hurts it the most. Not only can you not take cover or blindfire, you also can't climb, swim or even crouch, the latter point proving particularly painful when you run into a house and get shot through any number of waist-high windows. Similarly irritating is the ball and chain that is carrying one of the powder kegs or sacks of gold used in the objective-based game modes, since doing so restricts you from doing anything except jogging until you endure a lengthy animation of your character setting the item down.

There's a perfectly fine shooter at the centre of *Lead And Gold*, with guns that pop and exciting bolts for cover, but in pursuing arcade-style sensibilities Fatshark has failed to fully explore its game's potential. Rather than undergo the difficulties of implementing a greater range of intuitive movement, perhaps adding some grace to the combat, the developer has settled for a game that wouldn't have felt out of place six years ago. There's wild west fun to be had within these simplistic charms, but it's unlikely to replace your favoured multiplayer shooter. **[6]**

Sunset riding



The chance to be revived by another player after getting shot is *Lead And Gold*'s sole grudging acknowledgement of the direction multiplayer shooters have taken in recent years, yet here it doesn't quite work. The ability to keep shooting with your revolver once knocked down means most opponents will put you through the oddly dispiriting experience of being killed a second and final time before you've finished crumpling heroically to the ground, and any unlikely survivors will find that a wobbling, hazy camera makes lining up potshots at the other team more irritating than it's worth. It's best to simply lie back and take your dues, really.



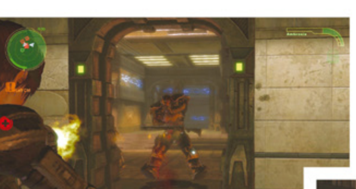


A digitally downloaded game, *Lead And Gold* isn't the most comprehensive thirdperson shooter ever created, but no doubt Fatshark will be expanding on the game's scope via expansions. Will anything more than levels get a look in?



THE SCOURGE PROJECT: EPISODES 1 & 2

FORMAT: PC **RELEASE:** OUT NOW **PUBLISHER:** BITBOX GAMES
DEVELOPER: TRAGNARION STUDIOS





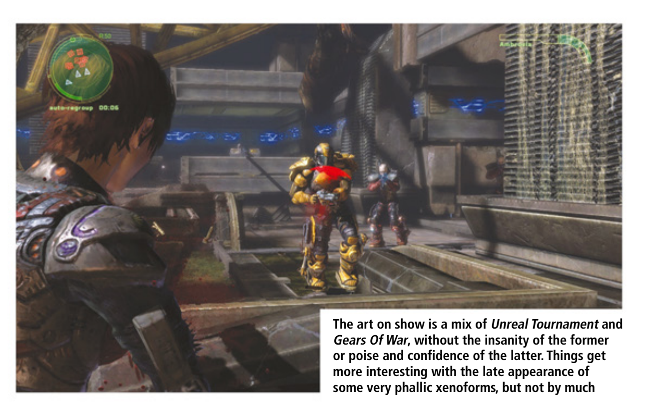


You spend most of *Episodes 1 & 2* shadowing Echo Squad's evil counterparts, Alpha Squad. It makes you think there'll be some kind of unique team-vs-team multiplayer to be found, but no

It would be a touch vicious to say that there's not a creative bone in *The Scourge Project*'s slender body, if not wholly inaccurate. It must have seemed so easy: *Gears Of War*'s slow thirdperson movement and robust cover system, together with *Left 4 Dead*'s slick and easy attitude to fourplayer co-op and *Borderlands*' RPG elements, all in one game.

Only the plot and world were left to figure out, which was evidently done with a wild and reckless disregard for shaking things up. The Nogari Corporation is conducting strange and terrible experiments deep inside a vast underground laboratory with more than its fair share of metal plating, unbreakable glass and foreboding, and it's up to Echo Squad to perform a daring infiltration and break its vice-like grip on the planet. As the team push deeper into the facility, however, they find that something's gone very wrong.

It's not the only thing that's gone very wrong. The cover system often has enemies hunkering down out in the open yet still leaning outwards from the hip to take shots. The AI, level design and writing all range from uninspiring to irritating, and most hopeless of all is how the game actually plays – unbearably clumsily, like a console shooter that's received the laziest of PC ports. It seems that no amount of appropriation can save a shooter from that tedious need for iterative design. Although, with Episode 3 on its way, it doesn't look like that's going to stop *The Scourge Project* from trying. **[3]**



The art on show is a mix of *Unreal Tournament* and *Gears Of War*, without the insanity of the former or poise and confidence of the latter. Things get more interesting with the late appearance of some very phallic xenoforms, but not by much



WHAT DID I DO TO DESERVE THIS, MY LORD!? 2

FORMAT: PSP **RELEASE:** OUT NOW
PUBLISHER: TECMO KOEI **DEVELOPER:** ACQUIRE

Poor old Badman. Not only does he have to deal with heroes constantly invading his lair, but Batman's threatened him with a lawsuit – hence the change of name for this excellent sequel to *Holy Invasion Of Privacy Badman!* It's essentially *Dungeon Keeper*'s concept in 2D, with an underlying system deep enough to reward all sorts of tactics, as well as a translation of rare wit and excellence (for which credit Atlus USA).

You are the Lord of Destruction (a free-floating pickaxe) tasked with filleting out a dungeon from a solid block of soil, and setting up an ecosystem of monsters therein. Every so often a JRPG stereotype or three enters the dungeon with the intent of kidnapping Badman, your mentor and all-round dean of wickedness, at which point you squirrel him away in a corner and watch hopefully as your army either destroys or is destroyed.

That monster ecosystem is the fulcrum: get it right and you'll demolish all-comers; get it wrong and a foppy bard will carry off Badman. The lowest level of monster, the slimemasses, need to be set up on little crossover routes that concentrate nutrients on specific blocks: as the blocks upgrade, you can unleash an insect that preys on the slimes, or a lizardman that preys on the insects, and so on. Every population has to be managed so there's enough food and the right area design for them to be at their most effective, and when you throw magic and mutation into the equation it gets dizzyingly complex.

There's training to help, which expands into a full challenge mode, as well as Badman's Chamber, which lets you experiment without any heroes around. The real star, though, remains the story mode: hilarious, tough and with a weird score-attack streak. There's loads to do here and, despite occasionally oblique rules, a system of interlocking beauty that amply rewards your time. **[8]**



The translation gets better and better as you dig deeper into the game, with several of the Badman Almanac entries miniature classics. It's first-rate work



Mutations occur when you put creatures in a situation too often – so if you starve them of food, a lizardman may mutate into a meaner, leaner variant that needs less nourishment but is also less fertile





3D DOT GAME HEROES

FORMAT: PS3 **RELEASE:** OUT NOW (JAPAN), MAY 14 (UK)
PUBLISHER: SOUTHPEAK GAMES
DEVELOPER: SILICON STUDIO **PREVIOUSLY IN:** E213

You already know what's going to happen when you attack the chicken fluttering harmlessly around *3D Dot Game Heroes*' opening village, such is the slavish attention to detail in Silicon Studio's homage to *The Legend of Zelda*. And, sure enough, one flock of angry birds later you'll be effecting a swift escape to the next area.

By modelling itself so completely on Nintendo's game, *Heroes* willingly places itself beneath a shadow from which it can never fully emerge. This is most apparent in its dungeons – faded copies of the masterclasses in game design they attempt to pastiche. Whereas every block, item and enemy in *Zelda*'s best dungeons combines to form an interlocking mechanical puzzle with the player at their heart, *Heroes* throws players into a series of flatly designed rooms with all these elements but none of their cohesion. An item picked up in the opening dungeon will be used to throw a single switch, and then forgotten about during a boss fight which requires nothing but to apply to the beast's flickering tail as many sword slashes as possible.

As a piece of nostalgia, *3D Dot Game Heroes* is without compare. Its three-dimensional pixels turn what were once abstract pieces of light into chunky toy-box bricks, and lend themselves perfectly to a character creator which allows players to make anything from a single, heroic pixel to a fully fledged robo-spider. And the entire experience is delivered with a good-humoured wink at games both old and new.

3D Dot Game Heroes is a curiosity. An inferior imitation of a two-decade-old series, it's nevertheless delivered with obvious affection for its inspiration and considerable charm of its own. It doesn't really offer anything new, but it does invite you to look back on how we used to live with a little more fondness. **[6]**





Combat is straightforward. Tapping 'X' will extend your hero's sword, and a turn of the analogue stick will turn that stab into a swipe. Upgrades to sword length and width can be purchased at the local smithy



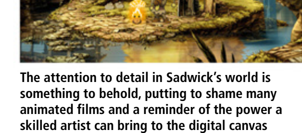
THE WHISPERED WORLD

FORMAT: PC **RELEASE:** OUT NOW **PUBLISHER:** DEEP SILVER
DEVELOPER: DAEDALIC ENTERTAINMENT



Your first point and click in *The Whispered World* will see you switching off the voiceovers. It's not entirely the actors' fault: the localised script is neither witty nor endearing enough to hit the emotional points it's aiming at. The story of teary-eyed clown Sadwick against the world, and a travelling circus troupe, it immediately plunges you into a fable about the power of hope and the reward of persistence.

Anachronistic to some, timeless to others, you'll spend your time combining items with environment to varying degrees of success. At least the interface is well designed. Holding down the left mouse button blossoms the cursor into the holy trinity of point-and-click functions – speak, touch, look – though the screen-obscuring inventory lacks the nuance of the finely drawn backdrops.



The attention to detail in Sadwick's world is something to behold, putting to shame many animated films and a reminder of the power a skilled artist can bring to the digital canvas

Visually, *The Whispered World* is a delight. Character designs are as bold and detailed as a full-scale Disney production, and the environments are melting pots of light, shadows and dust. The quality easily upstages the cutscenes, and letting your eyes feast on each location is the driving force of the experience.

It's a shame the drama doesn't punch at the same weight, its characters lacking the charisma and charm of genre titans. Fundamentally, it's difficult to care for a character so unenthused by his own existence. The ending, without giving anything away, at least tries to address this and does something commendably different. If it had been backed up by some more memorable moments, its grand ambition could have been justified.

The Whispered World is a world of paradoxes. The story tussles with deep themes while the design invites all ages. The puzzles demand illogical thought combinations while the tools are all right in front of you. But then this is a point-and-click adventure: what did you expect? **[6]**



The use of light, the delicacy of the shading and the richness of the palette all contribute to the scenarios, never confusing the eye and never truly giving away the secrets to each room


HSBC

TIME EXTEND

SIMCITY 4

FORMAT: **PC**
PUBLISHER: **ELECTRONIC ARTS**
DEVELOPER: **MAXIS**
ORIGIN: **US**
RELEASE: **2003**





Sirens, soot and strikes or a bountiful utopia? In the last of the SimCitys, the choice is yours

Eagles soar in smokeless skies and whales glide through the clean oceans. Herds of horses (or perhaps giraffes) are the only inhabitants of the lush plains and old-growth forests. The simulated world of *SimCity 4* is a peaceful place before you set about building your city. Boring, though. What it needs is urban sprawl, ribbon development along blacktop highways, strip malls and Dopplering sirens, chimneys belching soot, budget crises and strikes. What it needs, really, is problems – problems that you, the mayor, can solve.

That's the paradox at the heart of the appeal of *SimCity 4*. Much of the fun that comes from playing the 2003 apogee of the *SimCity* series of city design and management games is solving problems: relieving traffic on this avenue, removing the polluting your ample boulevards while skyscrapers sprout around them – again, something that reached its peak with the gorgeous, hugely detailed, entirely 3D-modelled graphics of *SC4*. But those are passive pleasures, to be enjoyed once a city has been built. First you must play the game – and its split personality means two different styles of play.

You can plan ahead and build with care, tending to your city like a bonsai tree, guiding every stage of growth and clipping and tweaking until it looks just right. This approach is deeply absorbing and can eat up tens of hours of dedicated play; the quality of the graphics has always made a beautiful city a highly desirable end. But that can be a bit boring. Often, a player will just want their city to get big quickly. So indulge in *SimCity 4*'s kinky secret: the joy of

Zones are laid out in artless but easy-to-build grids. Soon, your city is a snarling deathmaze of smog, crime, dereliction and gridlock. Bliss

industries from that business centre, restoring a depressed neighbourhood to prosperity. But these problems have to come from somewhere. Next to the game's peaceful, constructive, problem-solving side, it also nurtures the darker, more complex pleasure that comes from problem-creation. The tension between these two sides of its personality is written deep into *SimCity 4*; as we'll see, it's a reflection of the real-life systems and people that led to the creation of the game in the first place.

Key to *SimCity 4*'s enduring popularity is the fact that it can be enjoyed on a number of levels. Effective management can be satisfying in itself, given the game's devilish complexity compared to previous versions and its dozens of competing variables. When things are going well it can be pleasant enough to simply sit back and watch the contented populace streaming along unplanned sprawl. The city is developed hurriedly, with only the loosest plan in mind. Vast zones are laid out without much thought, in artless but easy-to-build grids, and with services added (maybe) as an afterthought. Obviously, this manner of play creates problems – but in *SC4*, that's a good thing. Pretty soon, your city is a snarling deathmaze of smog, crime, poverty, dereliction and gridlock. Bliss. These problems must be fixed to keep Gotham growing, but they can be 'fixed' in the same haphazard way that the city was thrown up in the first place: quickly, cheaply and dirtily. Roads and train tracks can be punched through run-down inner cities without protest; new business districts can be founded on the outskirts without caring too much about the chaos this will ultimately cause on the roads. Each solution brings a batch of fresh problems.



CITY LIMITS

***SimCity 4* was released at the beginning of 2003; later that year an expansion pack called *Rush Hour* was released. And with that, the *SimCity* franchise juddered to a creative halt. It had become too bloated and complicated, Maxis feared, and further iterations could not appeal far beyond the core audience without a radical change in direction. But that change in direction, 2007's *SimCity Societies*, was a dud, irking fans of the game without carving out its own following. Wright, who had little to do with *Societies*, left Maxis after overseeing the release of evolution sim *Spore* in 2008. While *The Sims*, another Wright creation, continues to go from strength to strength, *SimCity* looks like it has reached the end of its official development.**

This approach, with its swift returns and constant challenges, can be the most rewarding and most addictive way to play. Imagine that you lay out a residential district and it immediately develops into Snooty Corners, a rich neighbourhood full of attractive high-wealth houses and well-kept lawns. That part of the game map is pretty much done with – barring vandalism, there's nothing more you need do to it, so it's finished, dead, game over. But if it develops into Crystal-Methington, a crime-ridden hellhole full of empty lots and burned-out cars, well, game on, you'll be revisiting there pretty soon. The appeal of creating a 'perfect' city may be what draws players to the game in the first place, but actually perfecting a city is a losing approach. When it's done – admittedly after what could be tens of hours of play – what else is there to do? You can look at it, but that's more like owning a fish tank than playing a game. Almost every game is a struggle towards completion and perfection: *SimCity* gives you the opportunity to reject that goal, and to revel indefinitely in play. Its creator, Will Wright, called it more toy than game. It's a rare game that can be at its most fun when it's played 'badly'.





Larger cities are beautiful objects, and it's a pleasure just to sit back and watch them run, like a living organism rendered in Maxis' gorgeous 3D graphics

The reckless style of play can also, oddly, lead to the best results. Cities built as sprawls, full of improvised solutions and gimcrack workarounds, can be very attractive – certainly Maxis put as much aesthetic effort into the low-wealth commercial units and tenement blocks as it did into the pretty-pretty mansions and sparkling skyscrapers. But they're also appealing, and fun to play, because they most closely resemble real cities. And it's worth remembering that this high-speed slapdash improvisation is how most real cities grew, and are still growing.

Plus there's a sheer atavistic thrill that comes from playing the game fast and loose, with all sorts of destruction and little thought of consequences. Your urgently needed relief road happens to pass straight through a small, comfortable middle-class neighbourhood? Pah, build it anyway. Sure, you could spend the money on a neat little bus system, but isn't a glistening motorway just a bit more swanky? Similarly, a vast stadium complex is always going to be more appealing to the ambitious mayor in a hurry, even though a well-funded local library network could yield better results for a fraction of the cost. Huge engineering projects will always be more fun to put together, and more impressive onscreen, than microscopic local initiatives. A mayor should be building suspension bridges and airports – leave the rest to Extreme Makeover: Home Edition.





User-created content has been key to *SimCity 4*'s enduring popularity. All the cities pictured on these pages make extensive use of unofficial additions and mods, such as the Parisian buildings and city walls above

There are plenty of real-world examples of civic leaders' weakness for expensive, grandiose white elephants. But one particular figure stands out: Robert Moses. Moses, an American planner and administrator, came closer to playing *SimCity* with a real city than anyone else in the free world. Never once holding elected







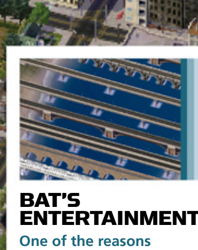
A 'region view' of several large cities. *SimCity 4* allows the creation of regions of linked cities, allowing a near-unlimited playing area with unprecedented opportunity for sprawl

office, he wielded unsurpassed power over the city of New York through mastery of its bureaucratic machinery, diabolical legal chicanery and an eerie knack for raising vast sums of money. Mayors, governors and even presidents were forced to let him have his way. He first used this power to build colossal parks and recreation beaches, making himself wildly popular, but his attention soon turned to highways. When Moses started his career in the 1920s, New York was just beginning to come to terms with automobile traffic. He shaped the way it responded, girdling the city in an elaborate web of freeways and neglecting public transport. These new superhighways often created as many problems as they solved, rapidly choking with cars. They drove suburban sprawl and were built with little regard for the residents who happened to be in the way. More than once, Moses demolished a thriving community to make way for a road, even though a perfectly good alternative route existed. When Moses was finally ousted in the 1960s, the city had an expensive freeway network, but was more jammed with traffic than ever. It was also teetering towards bankruptcy.

Wright built his city simulation to resemble a living thing, with interlinked processes and cycles interacting over time in a complex system

Moses did a lot, but he didn't do his worst. He wanted to slice freeways right across Manhattan itself, through some of the most expensive and crowded urban land in the world. One of these plans, the Lower Manhattan Expressway, was only defeated after a desperate struggle by a small community group led by a writer called Jane Jacobs. In the course of the campaign Jacobs wrote a book, the Death And Life Of American Cities, which defended the dense, mixed neighbourhoods that Moses dismissed as slums and encouraged a view of the city as a complex organism which needed nurturing, not drastic surgery.

Death And Life became a classic, and is still widely read. Among those who were influenced by it was Wright. He built his city sim to resemble a living thing, with scores of interlinked processes and cycles interacting over time in a complex system that the player can adjust and mould – a vision palpably drawn from Jacobs' work, and cultivated over time into the superbly complex and organic fourth game. Ultimately, then, Robert Moses could be seen as the wicked uncle of *SimCity 4*, indirectly inspiring it by causing Jacobs to mount her defence of city life. To enshrine Jacobs in a game, Moses had to go in there too – we can share his satisfaction in grand projects and wanton destruction. He's the dark side of the Force, one half of the duality that makes *SimCity 4* so seductive. Planning versus sprawl; micromanagement versus megaprojects; neighbourhoods and localism versus traffic, money and power. Those opposite poles keep the dynamo of *SimCity* spinning even after seven years; it is still rich and rewarding because it springs from the vital conflicts in our own world.



BAT'S ENTERTAINMENT

One of the reasons *SimCity 4* maintains a loyal and active fanbase is its openness to player-created modifications and custom content created using the Building Architect Tool, or BAT. *SimCity* players have since made thousands of new buildings for the game and dozens of patches and upgrades. As well as fixing flaws in the original, such as unrealistic road gradients, they have created what amount to mini-expansion packs, such as the indispensable Network Addon Mod (which hugely expands the flexibility of the road and rail systems) and The Dream City, a compilation put together by members of the Simtropolis.com.

"It's always surprised us that whenever we've given the players the opportunity to participate in the creation process, in every case they've exceeded our expectations," said creator Will Wright in 2008.





THE MAKING OF...
GROUND ZERO TEXAS

Silicon Valley wooed Hollywood with this full-motion video shoot 'em up featuring aliens invading a small Texan town

FORMAT: **MEGA CD** PUBLISHER: **SONY IMAGESOFT** DEVELOPER: **DIGITAL PICTURES** ORIGIN: **US** RELEASE: **1993**

All you need to make a movie, according to Jean-Luc Godard, is a girl and a gun. All you need to make a videogame, proved Nolan Bushnell, was a ball and a couple of bats. So what's needed for an interactive movie? In 1993, *Ground Zero Texas* tried to offer an answer: body-snatching aliens, particle beam cannons and lots of grainy full-motion video. In retrospect, it was an unholy alliance; a match made as much in hell as heaven. Yet, for a brief moment, FMV looked like the future of videogames.

The story of FMV in general, and *Ground Zero Texas* in particular, goes back to the mid-'80s when Nolan Bushnell's Axlon and toy maker Hasbro worked on Project NEMO, a VHS-based console. "Bushnell had struck a deal with Hasbro to build a 'Nintendo killer' console that would use FMV," recalls former Axlon employee **Ken Melville**. "Back in 1986 Nintendo was god of the universe. Nobody could touch it. So Axlon hired me and some top game designers – Steve Russell, Rob Fulop, David Crane, all kinds of cool folks – to design hardware and software that would use actual video to beat the crappy 8bit graphics in the Nintendo engine. And we did."

NEMO never came together. Five years later, a deal between Sega and Sony over a CD-ROM drive for the 16bit Sega Mega Drive was hatched, and ex-Axlon employees Melville and **Tom Zito** founded Digital Pictures in 1991. The first games out the gate were rehashes of unreleased FMV titles developed for NEMO, including *Sewer Shark* and *Night Trap*.

> "Nintendo was god, so Axlon hired me and some top game designers to use actual video to beat Nintendo's crappy 8bit graphics"

Ground Zero Texas was a second-generation Digital Pictures title, green-lit as the cash flowed into the company thanks to *Sewer Shark* being bundled with Sega's Mega CD. Shot by a Hollywood crew on a $2m budget, *Ground Zero Texas* wasn't just a game – it was a movie that you could play, and it promised to revolutionise both celluloid and silicon.

Sandhill Road in Menlo Park, California, is an innocuous-sounding address. But if you're a startup company looking for finance, it might as well be called Money Street since it's home to the biggest collection of venture capitalists in the world. This is where every dotcom found funding during the tech stocks boom. It's a place where money doesn't just talk, it works for a living too.

In 1992, Sandhill Road was also home to Digital Pictures. "It was a wonderful office to work in," recalls artist and animator **Joshua Solomon**. "We were surrounded by some of the most prestigious venture capital firms in the whole valley and the building we were working in doubled as an art gallery. You had Frank Stellas in the lobby, Chuck Close portraits on the walls. Really fantastic, inspirational artwork."

Both the location and the art could have been a metaphor for the company's own blend of art and commerce, abstraction and photorealism. Stepping into the Hollywood arena, Digital Pictures set itself up as movie production company that was based in Silicon Valley. "We really saw this as the new Hollywood," continues Solomon. "We'd make digital experiences that would be movies with scripts and actors but where the player could choose their own way of having the experience. Why watch a movie where you can't have any effect over it? Why not be able to come in and put your own stamp on it?"

Ground Zero Texas began life



Since the Mega CD hardware is incapable of running full-screen FMV, the UI pads the gaps, letting players track their cameras (bottom right), location and alien artefacts (centre), and their shots/kills ratio (left)



CHILLY B-MOVIES

In the early '90s, Sega's marketing was decidedly edgy. TV spots for *Ground Zero Texas* see rapper Chilly B yelling at a couch potato who's overdosing on B-movies ("Do you really have to watch the end of this movie to see how it's going to end? Here, take control!"). The ad signs off with the kamikaze suggestion that playing the game might make you kill your parents. Surprisingly, the game escaped rabid censure. The real FMV controversy magnet turned out to be the much-maligned *Night Trap* and its alleged promotion of violence against women. "Aliens," laughs Neumeier, "are never a problem."

as Project X, a treatment penned by Melville inspired by Invasion Of The Body Snatchers and Invaders From Mars. "I wrote a scenario in which a clever kid starts in his bedroom and, using binoculars and various snooping tools, discovers that his neighbourhood has been invaded," he says. "So he must take direct action himself, since nobody believes him. Sort of like Invaders From Mars except the kid gets an RPG and an Uzi and does it all himself… There was no passive citizenry in my game, dammit!"

By the time *Ground Zero Texas* went into production, it had been renamed and redrafted by various hands including Hollywood screenwriter **Ed Neumeier** (Robocop). In the finished game you're not a kid but a soldier, enlisted to fight aliens invading a Texas town. Holed up in a motel room with a bank of monitors showing video feeds from four camera-mounted plasma cannons, you're ordered to stem the tide of Reticulans by targeting them with your gunsight. It's essentially a shooting gallery and you flick back and forth between video feeds, watching cutscenes while keeping an eye out for Reticulans disguised as rednecks.

What made the game unique was the use of an LA film crew to shoot its FMV. Suddenly, Silicon Valley was encroaching on Hollywood's turf. "It seemed like it was slightly better funded than a Roger Corman movie," remembers Neumeier, who visited the California location during the 12-day shoot directed by Dwight H Little (Halloween 4). "It felt like a movie. If you'd just wandered up you wouldn't have realised that this was for a videogame." It was so groundbreaking that Digital Pictures had to enter into negotiations with the Director's Guild, Screen Actors Guild and Writer's Guild. "They didn't know how to deal with interactive art at all," says Melville. "No idea. It wasn't really an industrial medium, nor a commercial one. So we had to pioneer the agreements."

With a reporter from the New York Times on location looking for a story about "movies that push buttons", it was easy to get swept up in the New Hollywood mindset. As Zito told the newspaper: "Ultimately, I believe the [videogame] business will be more like traditional Hollywood stuff than what's coming out of Silicon Valley today: dinky animated guys running around the screen. We'll be doing interactive game shows, talk shows, dramas and sitcoms."





Not everyone was quite so convinced, least of all the studios themselves. "Hollywood looked at us the way you'd look at an industrial project, like a film for a car show or a documentary on manufacturing auto upholstery," recalls Melville. "It was nothing like today. They saw games back then the way you or I would look at a Speak 'N' Spell or some Leapfrog learning product for tykes today: 'That's nice. We make movies. Kiss our ass'."

No matter how exciting the journey, the landmarks passed along the way don't always warrant a second visit. Playing *Ground Zero Texas* today, it looks like a stunted, crippled thing. The B-movie acting comes with a whiff of over-ripe camembert; the digitised video is a jaundiced, granulated mess of 64 colours. "All our video had to be tortured, kicking and screaming, into the most horrifying, blurry, reduced-colour-palette mess imaginable in the Mega CD. I shudder to think about it," laughs Melville. "The audio, the video, the accessing of data on the sloooow crawling bandwidth of CD was all tortuous and disastrous for the game. The limitations presented were enormous."

In 1993, however, for the game's target audience of teens, it was breathtaking. This was a generation that had been weaned on Laserdisc coin-ops like *Dragon's Lair* and *M.A.C.H. 3* in the arcades, a generation that wanted the

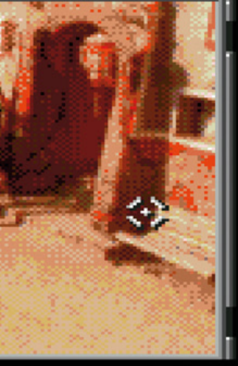






Veteran character actor Steve Eastin (Con Air, Field Of Dreams) leads the cast as Reece, the unit's commanding officer. His gruff, straight-to-camera pieces see him delivering put-downs ("You call that shooting?") and a Game Over sucker punch









Uninspired (and unforgiving) gameplay is divided between shooting-gallery segments and fly-on-the-wall cutscenes viewed through your camera. "It turned out nobody really wanted to watch the same video over and over again," says Solomon, drolly

future, today. FMV seemed to promise it. Where FMV games failed, and this was an instructive lesson, was in their interactivity – or rather their lack of it.

Ground Zero Texas is a strangely passive experience. You're sealed off from the action, locked away in a distant room in front of a bank of monitors and a weapons console that let you watch video feeds and fire particle cannons. Essentially, you're playing someone playing a videogame; it's hardly immersive. One of the central pleasures of videogames – the freedom to explore an imaginary environment and move through it freely – is denied. Instead, you become a voyeur. What was the point of being presented with a live-action world if you could do nothing except watch cutscenes and blast bad guys?

Everyone at Digital Pictures was aware of the limitations, says Melville. The problem was ingrained into the technology itself: "We talked about interactivity on two levels. I ran the creative department and we discussed the high concepts: the story, the characters, the interactions, the levels, the scoring, the goals, the missions, etc. Then on level two I'd have to take that into Mark Klein and others on the tech side and he'd remind us what we could actually do, which was almost nothing. This is the Mega CD we're talking about here. It was a joke for FMV. I mean, it brought some cool games, sure. But once you needed to base your game on FMV… yikes! It was brutal and very, very tough to design for that set of production values."

Ultimately, it was 3D that would call time on Digital Pictures' FMV experiment. As *Ground Zero Texas* hit the shelves id Software released *Doom*, whose 3D world was totally immersive and didn't rob players of a sense of control. Id's game beckoned a different future, one in which a firstperson perspective was coupled with a sense of exploratory freedom.

Digital Pictures arguably led videogaming down a cul-de-sac, and yet the company's vision – designing games with movie-quality visuals and cinematic storytelling – hasn't died. Although today's designers have abandoned FMV for motion-capture, facial animations and voice acting, the goals haven't changed so much. Using raw film stock was a bold, early leap into the dark, an attempt to create the illusion of realism in games. It didn't work out, but it was a necessary experiment in an ongoing evolution that's being reiterated in *Heavy Rain* or the *Uncharted* games. To paraphrase William Blake, it's the crooked roads – not the straight ones – that are the roads of genius.

"This is the Mega CD we're talking about here. It was a joke for FMV. It brought some cool games, but was tough to design for"



FADE TO BLACK

Ever since *Dragon's Lair*'s blackouts, using video footage in games had been traditionally hindered by the second or two of delay that occurred as the Laserdisc searched for the next scene. *Ground Zero Texas* got round this by uploading three simultaneous video feeds from the disc to the Mega CD, while only displaying one to the player. It created a much smoother experience. "It was pretty advanced stuff," says Solomon. "The people we had working on the digital compression algorithms, like Charlie Kellner [who patented interactive CD streaming methods for *Sewer Shark*], were some of the best minds around."

Codeshop

Tracking developments in development

A material world

With Pixelux emerging from an exclusivity deal with LucasArts, we talk to the company that asks: why animate when you can simulate?



Vik Sohal, COO, Pixelux

Mild-mannered, measured of tone and with a gentle Californian accent, **Vik Sohal** doesn't sound like a man who wants to drastically alter the way games are made – but that's exactly what he is. "I really think this might be a revolution of sorts," he laughs nervously. "Like most revolutions, though, it takes a little while to get going."

Sohal is chief operating officer of Pixelux, the developer behind DMM (Digital Molecular Matter), a materials simulation system for videogames. A 15-man company distributed everywhere from California to Geneva – "We're not big, but we are efficient" – Pixelux's middleware has already been seen powering the warping girders and crumpled TIE Fighters of *Star Wars: The Force Unleashed*. Fresh from an exclusivity deal with LucasArts, Sohal's now hoping that DMM can rewrite the way games handle everything from physics to animation.

"The way that games are made these days, everything's scripted," he sighs. "You have your objects and you give them a few behaviours, but that's about it. With DMM, we're talking about creating an accurate simulation of the gameworld instead. We've reached a point where visual fidelity is very high. Now what's lacking is the kinetic fidelity: how things move.

"At the moment, you'd be surprised how much of the animation in games is done by hand. We think we can take all that to the next level: rather than relying on how well your animator can mimic movement, DMM simulates the properties of the materials, and that gets you a lot closer to the real thing."



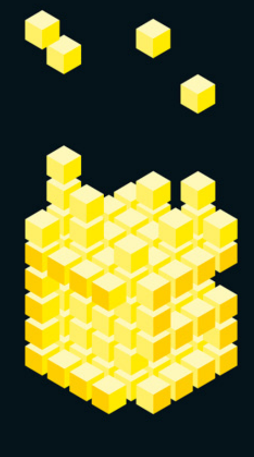
"Stay Dead has zombies with DMM flesh, and it's just more gruesome than anything you've ever seen"

It's a dramatically different approach to the rigid-body solutions used in most games. "In a rigid-body simulation, you're generally just modelling how heavy something is, and how much it bounces. You treat everything as a solid object that doesn't deform," says Sohal. "With DMM, you're controlling how flexible it is, how much strength it has, how much can it bend. We measure stuff like Poisson's ratio, the volume preservation constant: that tells us how objects behave if squished. Changing the form, but preserving the volume: that's very hard to animate by hand. Not only can we model that easily for any material, we can meddle with the ratio, and really get some unusual results. Or how about melting? That's just a decrease in Young's modulus, making the material more floppy. Anything that happens to an object is just a change in the physical constants, and once you understand that, you can simulate it."

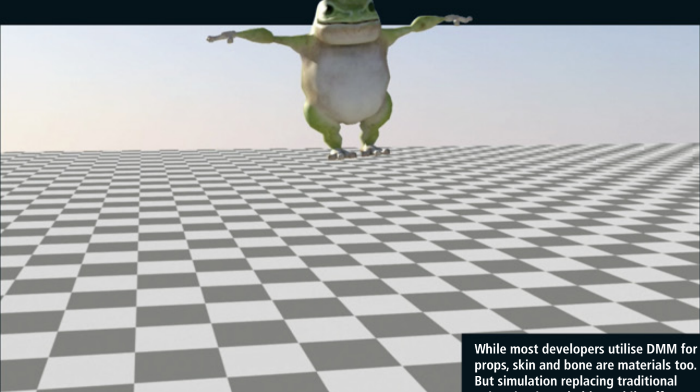
DMM works by taking 3D art models and breaking them up into pieces,

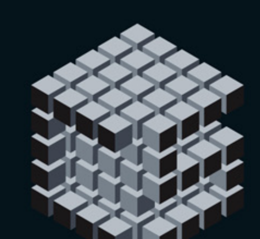


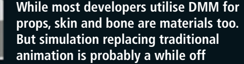
Space is the ultimate physics playground, as anyone who's ever tossed a TIE Fighter around will already know. That Pixelux is returning to the cosmos for its first in-house game may bode well



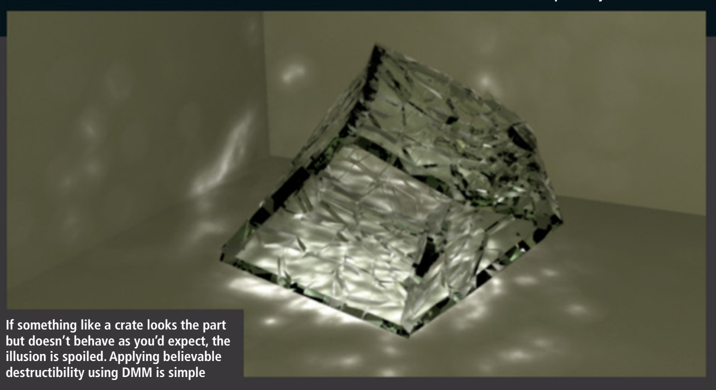








While most developers utilise DMM for props, skin and bone are materials too. But simulation replacing traditional animation is probably a while off



If something like a crate looks the part but doesn't behave as you'd expect, the illusion is spoiled. Applying believable destructibility using DMM is simple





New materials

As is the case with NaturalMotion, another LucasArts middleware standard-bearer, Pixelux is now using its own tools to make a game. "It's a space combat game, and with that theme, it's all about wacky situations with DMM mining colonies and space stations," says Sohal, suggesting that playing to the technology's strengths is a crucial part of the plan. "You'll pick up the controller and you'll instantly understand what you have to do: smash stuff, and blow stuff up." Pixelux is looking to distribute its debut title on PC, before hopefully releasing a version for XBLA, and admits that the shift from supporting software to actually making use of it has been an eye-opening experience. "Everyone that makes middleware should use it to make a game," he laughs. "When you actually have to use your own product, you totally realise the things you need to focus on. We've been integrating changes from partners like LucasArts for years, but when you use it yourself, it's still very surprising."

creating a tetrahedral cage. "That gives you a volumetric representation of the object," says Sohal. "That in turn is given to the simulation software, and you end up with a physical deformation system that operates independently of the surface mesh. We then model about 14 different variables to simulate any material."

Besides its dynamic in-game potential, Sohal argues that DMM has huge possibilities as a time-saving tool. "We've put a lot of effort into making DMM work in realtime, but there's much more scope beyond that. Cutscenes: if you want to have a monster crash through a wall, rather than animate that, you can simulate it and record the results."

Environmental art is another prospective shortcut: "Take something like the destroyed paradise of *Gears Of War*: to get that look you have to have artists who study broken things and can imagine the wider picture. With DMM, you could just create that paradise, and then physically destroy it to get the same result. Crush things, bend things, heat up the metal: you've created levels just by playing with them."

LucasArts provided an excellent opportunity for Pixelux to refine its technology, and DMM is already being used in the sequel to *The Force Unleashed*. But with its exclusivity period over, the middleware company is now working with various licensees, too. "One of the teams we're working with is a company called MunkyFun," says Sohal. "They're creating a zombie game called *Stay Dead*. They've got zombies with DMM flesh, and it's just more gruesome than anything you've ever seen: you can rip the arms out, and the flesh comes off. Then they've got guns that shoot DMM chains, which you can wrap around objects."

Asked if licensees are hesitant to gamble on such a distinct approach to physics, Sohal laughs. "There's always a certain degree of nervousness when it comes to adapting to new technology, and that comes from a lack of proof that a new technology is viable, and the complexity of integration. Both those problems have pretty much been solved for us, purely because we've already been in an A-list game."

Alongside improvements to DMM (a new plug-in entirely automates the process of turning in-game assets into DMM objects – without the designer even having to exit Maya), Pixelux is also working on a fully fledged follow-up, DMM2. As well as refining the way the software solves equations, providing more robust interaction between objects, DMM2 is being designed, ironically, to integrate better with existing rigid-body systems. "Adding a little bit of DMM2 to a rigid-body environment is actually really cool," enthuses Sohal. "If you have a rigid-body car, but you give it DMM tyres, the sense of movement you get as it rolls along is just astounding. It's a very easy win."

Crucially, an entirely free version of DMM2 will also be available for PC development, with the only caveat being a limit cap on the number of tetrahedrons available. "The idea is to increase the exposure," says Sohal. "One thing we've learnt over the years is that nobody wants to use something they've never even looked at. They need to play around with it first."

www.pixelux.com

Studio profile

Like Top Trumps, but for game dev

COMPANY NAME: Mind Candy

DATE FOUNDED: 2004

NUMBER OF EMPLOYEES: 30+

KEY STAFF: Michael Acton Smith (CEO), Toby Moore (CTO), Rebecca Newton (CCSO), Ed Relf (CMO), Divinia Knowles (CFO)



URL: www.mindcandy.com

SELECTED SOFTOGRAPHY: *Perplex City* (www.perplexcity.com)







Moshi Monsters sees players adopt and care for – what else? – a monster. Solving puzzles leads to rewards that can be used to buy items and food





LOCATION: London, UK

CURRENT PROJECTS: *Moshi Monsters* (www.moshimonsters.com)

ABOUT THE STUDIO:

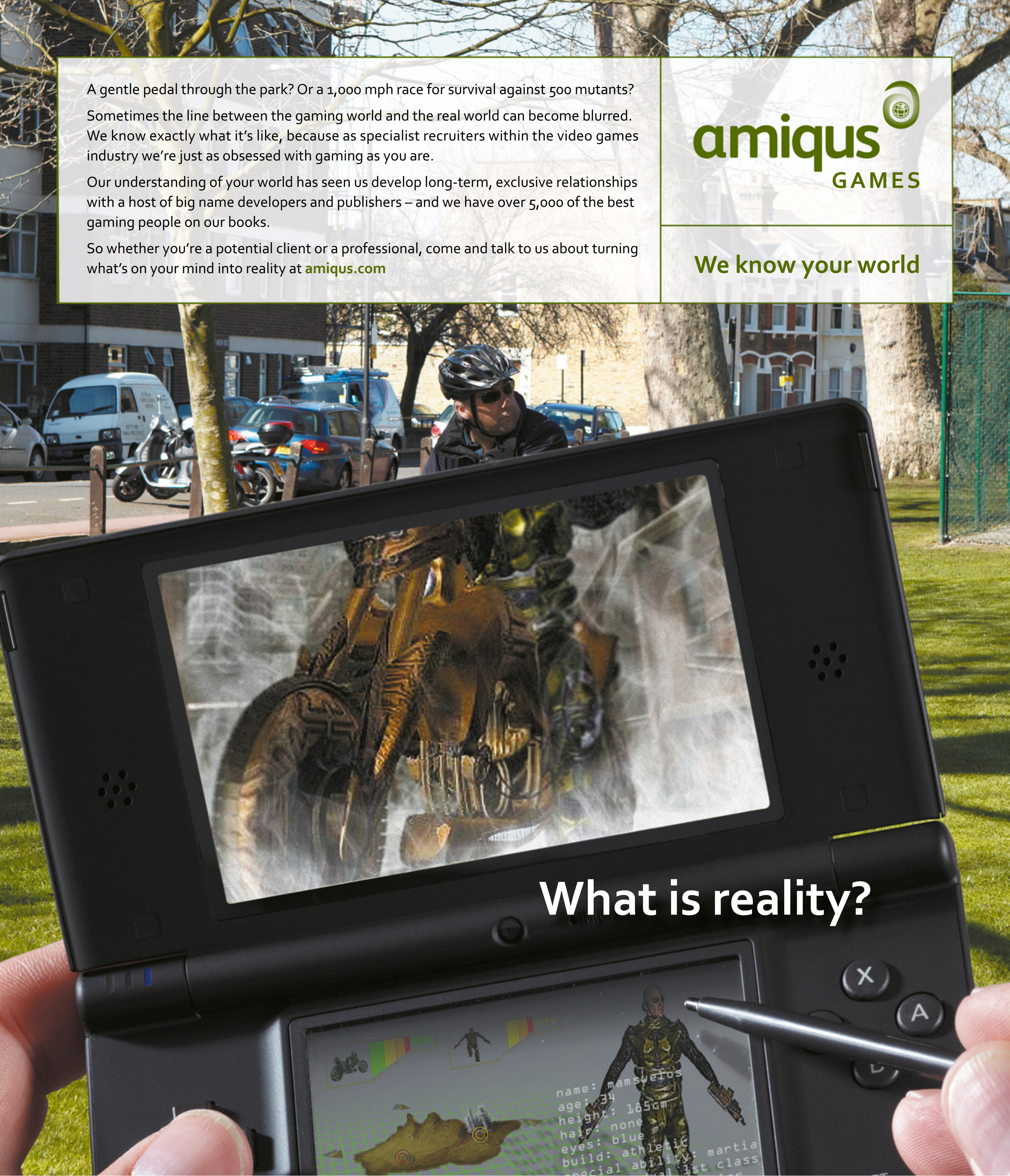
"Housing one of the world's fastest-growing social online games companies, Mind Candy studios are a hive of passion and creativity. Having started life in 2004 with the launch of the ARG *Perplex City*, the company is now solely focused on *Moshi Monsters*, an online game that is a cross between Tamagotchi and Facebook for kids. The browser-based Flash game added over ten million users last year and is now one of the fastest growing kids' sites in the world.

"The team of 30, which is set to double this year, is made up of some of London's brightest creative and technical individuals. The team is busy expanding the online world of moshimonsters.com and also exploring new offline products such as DS games, trading cards and books that all tie back into the virtual experience.

"With the addition of an extra 100,000 users per day, the fast-paced environment requires everyone to have an entrepreneurial and playful spirit to face the many business challenges from highly scalable systems engineering to industry-leading rich character animation, all of which are driven through agile development processes.

"The company was founded by Michael Acton Smith (co-founder of Firebox.com) and is backed by two of the leading venture capital firms in Europe, Accel and Index Ventures."




A gentle pedal through the park? Or a 1,000 mph race for survival against 500 mutants?
Sometimes the line between the gaming world and the real world can become blurred. We know exactly what it's like, because as specialist recruiters within the video games industry we're just as obsessed with gaming as you are.
Our understanding of your world has seen us develop long-term, exclusive relationships with a host of big name developers and publishers – and we have over 5,000 of the best gaming people on our books.
So whether you're a potential client or a professional, come and talk to us about turning what's on your mind into reality at amiqus.com
amiqus
GAMES
We know your world
What is reality?

THE UNIVERSITY OF HULL

GAMES EDUCATION WITH A REPUTATION

Below is a small selection of the games that Hull graduates have worked on...







BSc / MEng Computer Science with Game Development
MSc Games Programming
MSc Graphics Programming

Employers say:

"Hull University offers a course that provides its students with highly relevant industry skills and pushes them to excel in an energetic environment. It's great to see students that not only meet the expectations of a highly competitive job market, but raise that bar still further."

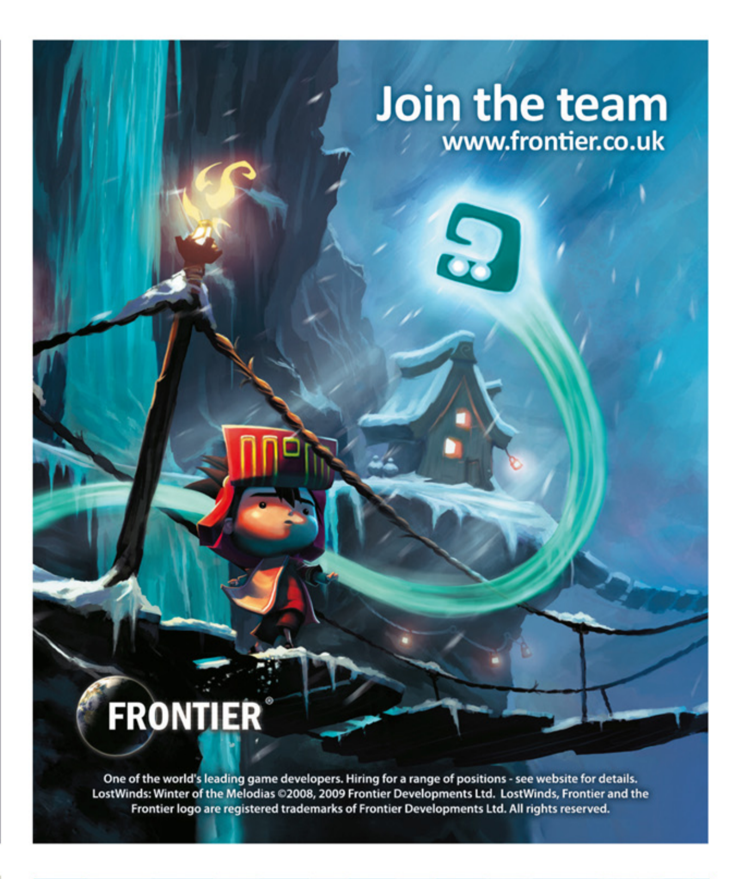
Tom Williams: Technical Director - Blackrock Studio

Graduates say:

"After some years working as a programmer in small games companies, I decided to attend the MSc in Games Programming at Hull University to improve my CV and academic skills. It was probably the best investment of my life. Five months before the end of the course I got a job offer and now I'm working as a programmer for a AAA studio."

Manuele Bonanno: MSc Graduate 2008

For more quotes from ex-students, examples of student work and syllabus information please visit: www.mscdegrees.com









Miniclip is the world's largest online games website with teams in Switzerland, USA, UK, Estonia and Portugal.


BY RANDY SMITH

HI, I'M RANDY Videogame design, etc

Lengthy arguments

A while back I wrote about how repetitive gameplay over long periods of time can provide a depth of familiarity unique to our medium. That's true, and great, and whatever, but to be less sunny about it my honest opinion is that most games don't achieve this ideal, this gradual osmosis of artistic intent. Most games are just way too long. Presumably, you also hardly ever finish games you start, and those you do finish involve some punishing, boring slog solely for the sake of completion. Right?

One of the things that's supposed to keep us playing is story, but let's face it, most videogame stories suck. My favourite game stories, the ones I was really impressed by, are maybe those from *Indigo Prophecy* and *GTAIV*. I found the characters unusually multidimensional and their plights relatable. But if you stitched all those cutscenes together, the result would suffer in comparison to all but the most ridiculous films, like 2012 or The Phantom Menace. The state of the art of story content in games is horribly impoverished, and on top of that, or probably related to it, these stories are incredibly long. The opportunity to watch a crappy story for nine hours is a poor incentive for me to keep playing a game. That'd be like watching Star Wars Episodes I, II, and III back to back. It would be a sad day.

Fallout 3's story topics are no better. Making a tale about fire-breathing giant ants supply lasting value to my life requires more work than exhibited by Bethesda's thin, campy material. Where *Fallout 3*'s fiction shines is in technique – storytelling as opposed to story content, the fact that story choices are woven into gameplay, triggering side quests that advance my character, that sort of thing. This alludes to the real merit of *Fallout 3*, which isn't story at all. Wandering the wasteland provides an experiential appeal with true longevity, one I can imagine revisiting for the foreseeable future, in part because there is no story to demarcate the time.

> "Here's my proposal: let's make two- or three-hour games the new standard. Games that we will actually finish"

Obviously, the real reason we play games is for gameplay. The best games present some innovative, compelling new interaction that you haven't already experienced and is worthy of your precious time. How long does it take before you've explored the mechanic pretty fully, tried it in different scenarios, met your personal goals and are feeling satisfied? A few hours? So what are the remaining six or more hours for? At GDC this year, Chris Hecker ranted about the importance of creating enough content to explore the central game mechanic to the depth it deserves. His concern was games that don't achieve enough depth, and my point is the complement: games that reach the bottom and hang out doing nothing.

Why is the 12-hour-or-longer game the industry standard? Because consumers demand it. They would rather have a company expend their effort unnaturally stretching a three-hour concept over a dozen hours than have them really focus on making those first three pre-exhaustion hours, the ones you are actually going to play, as perfect as they can be. Isn't that weird? You might really love a movie, but does that mean you want it to last all day? Or perhaps you actually gain more satisfaction from the fact that the movie reaches a natural conclusion after a couple of hours? Some people report that they enjoy the mechanical, mindless repetition of playing a game on autopilot. That seems odd, but who I am to judge? After all, I like to go hiking, but it's not like I'm actually trying to get somewhere by walking. It's a question of different values.

So, fine, videogames elongated specifically for the purpose of wasting the player's time should be permitted to exist, but does that duration need to be so ubiquitous? Here's the thing that happens to me: I reach the point of satisfaction two or three hours in where I think fondly of the game, have had a good time exploring the mechanic, and feel done. But the game disagrees with me, pointing out that I've only seen a fifth of the cutscenes, four of the power-ups and just a couple of levels. I believe I've had a graceful arc with a satisfying point of closure, but the game argues that I'm just at the beginning. We have to part ways disagreeably, the fondness diminished, akin to a break up. The box haunts my shelves, like it would be awkward to play again in the future.

Here's my proposal: let's make two- or three-hour games the new standard. Games that we will actually finish. Games befitting a mature, adult media consumption habit. Games where the player's natural arc of satisfaction with the experience is in harmony with the game's arc of the story and other elements coming to conclusion. Let's make these games replayable, so that we can opt into more hours of an experience we really loved. And, yes, let's provide a free-play mode where I can wander the wasteland all I want, returning to the romance in a way that's not so awkward.

Randy Smith is the co-owner of Tiger Style, whose first game, Spider, is available now for iPhone and iPod Touch



TRIGGER HAPPY Shoot first, ask questions later

The other side of grind

BY STEVEN POOLE

Roberto Bolaño's posthumously published novel, 2666, is a masterpiece that deliberately tries the reader's patience. The fourth of the five 'books' that make up the work is called The Part About The Crimes, and consists of a relentless catalogue of murders of women, written mainly in the unemotional, empirical style of police reports: the body of the next victim was discovered in such-and-such a location, in such-and-such a state of undress; the following witnesses were interviewed, the case was shelved; and so forth. The reader's response mutates as the implacably unchanging tone of professionally described violence is sustained to amazing length. Over the course of nearly 300 of its 900 pages, one passes from morbid fascination, through disgust, to a kind of glazed apathy then back to an unsettling mix of horror and boredom.

I long ago pointed out that one obvious problem for videogames' pretensions to deliver a kind of 'interactive narrative' was that novels and films do not require readers or spectators to solve a logic problem, or to press an arbitrary sequence of buttons, in order to see what happens next. Yet the fourth part of 2666 is in a way analogous to that kind of challenge, erecting an obstacle in the reader's path, and mercilessly withholding the usual bookish pleasures. "You want to see how the story turns out?" the novel seems to be saying. "Very well then; but first you're going to have to read *this*." In fact, it resembles not so much a videogame puzzle or a boss encounter as a sadistically extended RPG-style grind. In the classic videogame grind, you set out deliberately to provoke random battles in order to gain more currency or power. In The Part About The Crimes, you are subjected to a brutally repetitive sequence of murder reports, and challenged to find any reason for or in it.

This is something only a very long book can get away with, and only in the middle: the foregoing must have instilled sufficient confidence in the reader that the author knows what he is doing, and there must be sufficient payoff afterwards. Videogames, too, tend to employ this kind of sandwich motivational structure: the promise of new weapons or abilities, and then the satisfaction of employing them, will make, or so it is hoped, the grind seem worthwhile. But the suspicion may remain that the videogame grind is a hermeneutically empty thing when set beside Bolaño's brutal experiment: rather than heaping episode on episode to cumulative effect, a game merely orders you to do more or less the same thing innumerable times until some precalibrated counter ticks over. Both kinds of grind are about despair – but whereas The Part About The Crimes reeks of existential, civilisational despair, the videogame grind's despair is irredeemably suburban, of the kind that may occur to anyone on a commuter train.

> "The way in which Half-Minute Hero compresses RPG grind into 30 seconds is a devastating challenge to an entire genre"

And then along comes *Half-Minute Hero*, a game that is an extraordinarily savage satire of this long-accepted paradigm. A lot of the pleasure of the game, of course, lies in its loving aesthetic pastiche and sheer silliness (I was particularly happy when I was wearing a 'charisma wig' and 'comfy sandals'); a lot of its parody, meanwhile, consists of good-humoured in-jokes ("Who heals major injuries just by taking meds?"). Yet the way in which it compresses the standard RPG grind – as well as the initial briefing, the fetch missions, and the climactic boss battle – all into some delirious small multiple of 30 seconds is not only a brilliant gimmick but a devastating challenge to an entire genre – and games beyond the strict RPG genre proper that employ analogous mechanics. After all, if the essence of so many games' periodic challenge-grind-reward structure can be boiled down into mere seconds – and *Half-Minute Hero* shows that it can – the uncomfortable question is unavoidable: what exactly are most games doing to justify their enormously greater length?

You could argue that, in its very dreariness, the standard videogame grind at least has the structural function of separating moments of excitement, as well as cynically exploiting the psychological truth that if you have worked for something, you value it more. But Roberto Bolaño's literary grind, in 2666, is also doing something else: it demands that the reader scrutinise his own relationship to fictional violence and interrogate his own disappointment that in this novel, by contrast with so many others, the work of a serial killer is not rendered entertaining. In comparison, the requirement to grind in most videogames is mere padding (even if MMORPGs, at least, provide an exoludic justification for the levelling treadmill, in the element of social competition). Which is why *Half-Minute Hero* is not only a joyous celebration of our 16bit heritage, but also constitutes some of the most devastating peer criticism yet witnessed of formal gaming traditions that we too often take for granted.

Steven Poole is the author of Trigger Happy: The Inner Life Of Videogames. Visit him online at stevenpoole.net







SATURDAY 24 JULY 2010 | **SUNDAY 25 JULY 2010**

MAIN STAGE



HEAVEN & HELL

RONNIE JAMES DIO · TONY IOMMI · GEEZER BUTLER · VINNY APPICE

FOREIGNER

GARY MOORE



THE UNION



JOE BONAMASSA

BACHMAN & TURNER

UFO

THE QUIREBOYS

HAMMER STAGE

Black Label Society

SAXON

CATHEDRAL • HAMMERFALL

ORANGE GOBLIN

BLACK SPIDERS • NEW DEVICE



CLUTCH

HIGH ON FIRE

AUDREY HORNE

LETHARGY

PROG STAGE

TRANSATLANTIC



ASIA

DWEEZIL ZAPPA

MARTIN TURNER'S WISHBONE ASH
(PERFORMING ARGUS)

TOUCHSTONE • PENDRAGON

marillion

ARGENT

URIAH HEEP
(PERFORMING DEMONS & WIZARDS)

MAGNUM

STEVE HACKETT

FOCUS • THE REASONING

LONDON VICTORIA PARK

FESTIVAL'S 24 HOUR HOTLINE: 0871 230 5582

WWW.HIGHVOLTAGEFESTIVAL.COM

SUBJECT TO LICENSE

Custom built *by* rock fans, *for* rock fans



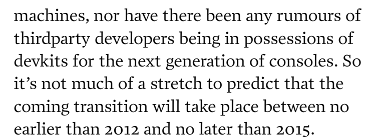


BY N'GAI CROAL

PLAYING IN THE DARK ...because people refuse to see

Hollywood blues

When it comes to console transitions, the rule of thumb is that they should arrive, like clockwork, every five to six years. Yet here we are, heading towards the fifth anniversary of the Xbox 360's release, and March's Game Developer's Conference came and went without any mention of new hardware. Instead, the platform holders appear to be focused on new peripherals (Microsoft's Natal, Sony's Move and Nintendo's Vitality Sensor) and new handhelds (Nintendo's hastily announced 3DS and Sony's long-rumoured PSP2). None of the current consoles have hit the massmarket price points of $99 or $129, nor have they crossed the threshold of 100 million units sold, though Wii is looking like it'll hit that by 2012. And apart from some occasional grumbling about the storage capacity of DVDs for 360 games, developers and publishers haven't been clamouring for new machines, nor have there been any rumours of thirdparty developers being in possessions of devkits for the next generation of consoles. So it's not much of a stretch to predict that the coming transition will take place between no earlier than 2012 and no later than 2015.



> For the first time I can remember, most thirdparty publishers are not primarily focused on the console with the largest market share

Regardless of when the transition will arrive, the question that's been on my mind lately is this: can the videogame industry survive another transition? With every announcement of yet another studio closure or yet another round of layoffs, it becomes increasingly clear that the fundamentals of this sector are not as strong as they once were. For years now, executives and industry spokespeople have crowed about how annual videogame revenues have surpassed those of Hollywood (true if you only consider box office and leave out DVD and the other revenue windows that Tinseltown enjoys). Well, be careful what you ask for, because the economics of making videogames have rapidly become akin to Hollywood, going from six figures in the PlayStation era to seven figures in the PS2 era to eight figures at present.

Sony execs have publicly stated that *God Of War III* cost $44 million to develop, while a Rockstar Games bigwig revealed that *Grand Theft Auto IV* cost around $100 million to produce. Factor in increasing marketing costs now that television is a bigger part of the mix – rumour has it that Activision spent $50 million+ to advertise *Modern Warfare 2*, to say nothing of the Super Bowl ad EA ran to promote *Dante's Inferno* – and it's clear that the industry is steadily moving away from a traditional portfolio strategy of singles, doubles and triples along with home runs to an industry that is primarily focused on home runs. And if that sounds like Hollywood, where studios appear to be abandoning a varied mix of movies in favour of big-budget 'event movies', that's because it is.

How did publishers and developers find themselves in this state of affairs? Part of it has to do with the cost of HD game development: it simply costs more to make even the same kinds of genres that produced the biggest hits in the previous generation, which pushes out the break-even point and makes flops have an even bigger impact on the bottom line. Part of it is that, almost from the beginning, this generation has been more winners take all rather than a rising tide lifting all boats; a few games every month get the lion's share of sales, and the rest appear to limp along until the next blockbuster is released. Part of it is the evolution of retail, where the Wal-Marts of the world have cut their initial inventory from four weeks to two and are only interested in carrying the top ten or 20 games.

And part of it is that, for the first time that I can remember, most thirdparty publishers are not primarily focused on the console with the largest market share. In fact, it's the opposite: no thirdparty publisher has even come close to figuring out a viable portfolio strategy for the Wii. Any successes appear to be one-offs – a *Guitar Hero III* here, a *Carnival Games* there, a *Just Dance* for good measure – but nothing that points the way towards a sustainable thirdparty business model. So while Nintendo dominates its own platform, thirdparties are concentrating on Xbox 360 and PS3, where the behaviour of consumers is more readily understood, where the audience is more aligned with the titles developers know how to make and promote.

This, then, is the state of affairs that has resulted in a slew of layoffs and studio closures – many of them taking place after 2007, the year the industry set records for annual revenue. So is it any wonder that I'm pessimistic about the impact the next transition will have on developers and publishers? Higher costs of development. Increasingly fragmented audiences (I didn't even touch on iPhone or Facebook). Divergent motion controllers. Uncharted territory regarding the rates of adoption for new consoles coming off a prolonged cycle for the previous machines. May you live in interesting times, states the Chinese proverb, and interesting times most certainly lie ahead. But can the industry live through them? We shall see.

N'Gai Croal is a writer and videogame design consultant. You can follow him online at ncroal.tumblr.com



inbox


Issue 214

ONLINE OFFLINE

Choice cuts from Edge Online's discussion forum
forum.edge-online.co.uk

Topic: Ubisoft goes green, bye bye game manual.

Ubisoft are trying to lead the way in the green stakes by doing away with the game manual for their PC, 360 and PS3 games. I'm up for the 'greener' side of gaming, but it still makes me wonder if these companies are serious about this as a green issue. Why not push for full digital distribution?
PermiaN

They should really be making the cases out of 100 per cent cardboard. I mean, the manuals are already recyclable.
terra_cotta_pie

Do people actually chuck games in the recycle bin when they are finished with them? I don't even throw books into the recycle bin. I feel guilty. I charity shop everything. What they do with them is anyone's guess...
Heavy Voodoo

What is it with having to 'unlock' the hardest difficulty level on some games? I understand that developers want to ease people into their games, but since when does this mean that you should be forced to play the entire game in a certain way?

I recently played through *Brothers In Arms: Hell's Highway*. Decent game, I thought, but a bit easy. As hard mode was locked I played through it on the medium difficulty (easy-peasy: the Germans have big red circles over their heads – you can't miss 'em). The story was OK-ish, but a bit forced and clunky. I just couldn't find any drama in it. I played in a simple pattern: suppress, flank, kill, repeat, watch cutscene, until I finished the game. Now I was given and I could now become completely immersed in the action of guiding my troops, protecting them and harnessing their separate skills, and I felt their losses much more deeply. Basically, the game became more involved. And this had the knock-on effect of making the storyline work emotionally. I could now empathise more with my main character, whereas before I had been only witness to, and not participant in, his anguish. The entire game made more sense when I understood the hardship that the soldiers were experiencing. Was it really necessary for me to have to complete it before I could play it in a way that I clearly found more enjoyable?

This is annoying. Once again it isn't

I could now become completely immersed in guiding my troops, protecting them and harnessing their separate skills, and I felt their losses more deeply

the option to play in 'authentic' mode, which would give me a Medal of Honor for every mission I completed. Well, whoop-de-do.

But I tried one of the 'authentic' missions and was surprised to find the game changed completely. With most of the visual indicators gone, the game transformed into a more instinctive, organic experience. I ran from cover to cover no longer cocksure that I wouldn't be hit, but with trepidation and even fear. I could not be sure that the enemy troops I thought I'd wiped out were entirely gone. There could be more, and there often were, lying in wait. The grim reality of war suddenly became apparent, and I was no longer playing the cushy little game from before.

This had a profound effect. It made the core game much more enjoyable really the story that's the problem, but the conviction with which it has been delivered. Something as trivial as the difficulty level in the game should not get in the way of this.

Recommending a particular setting would have been preferable, but enforcing one ruined the game experience. *Race Driver: Grid*, *Modern Warfare 2* and *ArmA 2* are all excellent examples of how to approach this problem. By making the difficulty level more configurable, providing an initial test as a mediator for the player's ability, or making the short-term problems negligible, the player can play the way they want.
Ambrus Veres

We're currently putting together an article related to some of these issues. To ease a bit of your *Brothers In Arms*-related pain in the meantime, spend some time with your new DSi.


Letter of the month wins a DSi

Whilst visiting Mega 64's website, I saw a video that left me thinking about the advent of motion controls taking over gaming.

The video has our protagonist complaining that he doesn't like the motion controls of each new console, and wants videogames to go back to the way they were before the rise of motion controllers. He decides to give all his motion-controller games to a charity, the punchline being that the charity is one for disabled people, who are not able to participate in the games.

This left me wondering where, if these games are marketed as being for everyone, this leaves disabled people? If this is the way of the future of gaming, I don't like the idea that while we may be reaching out to more people who have never played before as they are frightened of the controllers' buttons, we may be losing players if it all becomes too active.

We need to strike a balance by both sitting down and playing games that people love, and standing up and playing the motion-control games that people also love. If we leave one way of play behind, we may lose more players than we've gained over the



years, and that's not a good thing for any emerging industry at all. There needs to be a balance between social gaming and gaming that people want to enjoy by themselves.

But seeing the way all three console manufacturers are going, saying that these controllers are for the future, you can't help but think that they may leave the old traditional ways behind. If they do, they will alienate a lot of traditional gamers and those who are not as mobile as others.
Yousef Balboul

The issue is only going to grow in significance. You know how, following Sony's *EyeToy: Kinetic*, Nintendo's Wii gave new life to the 'fitness game' genre? Well, next year, just perusing the shelves full of Natal-powered software dedicated to getting you in better shape may leave you exhausted.

I was most surprised and delighted to read your interview with game designer Reiner Knizia [**E**212]. I've been playing videogames since I was six, and probably got into board games around the same time. It's always been about gaming with me, though videogames were always much more dominant in my life. As with probably 99 per cent of people reading your magazine, my experience with board games has always been confined to those dreadful boxes you can find in any toy store in the world; games like Monopoly, Cluedo and Risk, which can be fun if – like me – you used to enjoy the huge family fights that erupt during the playing of those games. The challenge in winning one of these games is close to nil – they're all based on luck and you might as well throw a couple of dice and whoever throws a six wins the game.

After years of extreme fun with videogames, I must confess I have now discovered a new world of gaming, the so-called 'German' board games you mention in the interview. The irony is, **Edge** lies at the base of this newfound passion. Whilst reading your interview with Steve Jackson, in **E**183, he had mentioned he absolutely loved games like Caylus, and El Grande. I looked up those games, and through a friend discovered this almost parallel universe few people have ever heard of. Steve Jackson mentioned it in his interview: the good thing about board games is simplicity – the kernel of a good board game is a good design idea. This is very true: whereas only a few of my friends got into videogames during their lives (well, some actually love it, but never bought a Wii or whatever out of fear of "getting addicted to the thing"), buying a £35 box and playing one session of one such game has been enough to get almost half my friends regularly around the gaming table. It is true that it's a very social thing: you get together with a few mates, put food and drink on the table, and you have a ball. Mind you, most of these games are strategically very challenging, so winning a session is bloody hard, but all the more rewarding when you actually end up first on a scoring track.

So I confess: I'm a convert. I've put my Wii Remotes on a shelf and when I'm talking about 'games' nowadays, my friends know a big cardboard box is bound to come out of the cupboard.

Not that I've lost all interest in videogames: I will still run to the store the minute a new *Mario* or *Zelda* game hits the shelves, but I'm just much more drawn to this very different but incredibly fun form of gaming. It has many advantages: it's extremely accessible (two hours and you're done – then it's time for the next game), it's a lot cheaper than most videogames, and you can take one anywhere and have a go with it. So I applaud **Edge** for shedding some light on this wonderful form of entertainment, and hope you've made a lot of other readers curious about decent board games.
Rafaël Theunis

I will still run to the store the minute a new Mario or Zelda game hits the shelves, but I'm just much more drawn to this very different form of gaming


Ambrus Veres laments *Brothers In Arms*' default difficulties, which hide away its 'authentic' mode



Topic: Does twitch gaming influence real life?
Besides split-second reactions, do any of you fancy yourselves better at something in real life from prolonged practice in a game? Does understanding the inner workings of your car in *Forza* and the layout of the track enhance your chances of successfully navigating said track out in the real world?
Speedhaak

Pretty sure that endless amounts of in-game button mashing means I can input my PIN in record time.
All those split seconds build up over time, y'know.
Blue Swirl

Does *Guitar Hero/Rock Band* on expert count as twitch gaming? If so, it influences real life by giving me RSI. Real pain!
hylian_elf

It's not exactly twitch, but I think that iPhone *Harbour Master* and the like have helped me run busy shifts in the restaurant where I work. Shame I keep mistaking some guests for pirates and throwing olives at them.
metagonzo

I once found myself in a real-life overtaking manoeuvre that was going rapidly wrong.
Instead of the sensible choice of hitting the brakes and tucking in behind the car to my left (and avoiding the impending barrier), in a split second I elected to drop a cog and power past into the gap.
I swear it was all the hours I was putting into *Project Gotham* that made me decide to do that, and in theory save my life.
Of course, you could argue that without all the fake racing instincts buzzing round my brain I wouldn't have attempted the manoeuvre in the first place.
ubermod



Yousef Balboul wonders how the rise of more physically challenging software, such as Wii Fit, is going to separate communities

Thank you for your recent piece on Games for Windows Live. It seems strange that Microsoft's flagship service can be so poor, yet this can go widely unreported in the videogaming press. Your cataloguing of its many failures is just what is needed to kick it into gear or, more likely (and even preferably, with the far superior Steam already being everything Live hoped for and more), see it laid to rest by

Continued

developers. Even outside Games for Windows Live, however, PC gaming seems to be moving backwards.

The most extreme example, still thankfully somewhat anomalous, is *Modern Warfare 2*. The justified outcry over the lack of dedicated servers was met with vague and near-farcical claims that this was in fact an improvement for PC gamers. The decrease in flexibility and connection speeds has resulted in a much more console-like experience, with all the great features we missed out on in *Call Of Duty 4*, like enjoying watching a killcam of your demise that's curiously different to the version of events that played out moments before, as you repeatedly shot your killer in the face.

Further changes to a console style include the inability to join long matches mid-game, a lack of mid-game team balancing (perhaps being in a whole match outnumbered six to three was felt to be too good for PC gamers to miss out on), and no way of choosing what map one will be playing. Even the minor things, like ping times becoming four green bars, seem to represent nothing but a change for the stupid. Was the concept of an actual value in milliseconds too hard? Then there are admittedly novel but entirely pointless things from consoles, like the differentiation of 'player' and 'ranked' matches. Who are these changes aimed at? I would imagine the average PC gamer with a machine capable of running, for example, *Modern Warfare 2* is quite familiar with the way online games work, but even if they aren't, do these 'features' really simplify proceedings? Numerous disconnections and waiting to find an appropriate game seem to be the cost of losing dedicated servers, and my average downtime between games has certainly increased. Any apparent increased ease is merely because there are fewer options in choosing your upcoming game, but would even newcomers consider this trade-off for the better?

Developers appear to be confusing increasing popularity of online multiplayer on console with a dislike of PC online. Far from it – the PC remains the superior platform for many, only hindered by 'couch factor', and downgrading the PC version to match the console one is in nobody's favour.

There is of course an incredibly cynical explanation: that publishers are pressing for increasingly limited PC versions, with differences so slight that players might as well opt for the console edition, with the increased retail price and apparent reduction in piracy that entails. This seems to fit in with the rather bizarre state of PC publishing in general. Ubisoft are keen to employ a seemingly deliberately detestable DRM system, and for some unexplained reason most of their recent releases are (permanently?) unavailable to UK customers on Steam. The same goes for THQ's *Metro 2033*, which seems especially bizarre given that upon installing the retail version it runs through Steam anyway.
John Lynch

Homogenising console and PC versions is more likely to be about cost-cutting, but that doesn't make it any more palatable. You have our support: PC games should be PC games.



Topic: Name the new Respawn/Zampella war game
So, we know that they've formed a new studio called (clue there) Respawn Entertainment.
These two blokes, Zampella and wotshisname, are esteemed by their colleagues and public alike as 'creatives' at the top of their game. They have left big nasty Activision and evil puppy murderer Kotick and are now living a blissful existence spending EA's money.
These colossi, these GODS, will need a name for their new game. Let's have a guess, then.
Sophie

Modern War: Duty Calls?
djchump

Traditional Thoroughfare 2: New Jersey Turnpike Edition.
rickjoyce

Corporate Antivision: Megacorp Takedown.
W3881N5

Title of Game Colon Subtitle.
ubermod

War's Warriors.
Mr. Brooks

Colon: Shit.
Unlikely

Call Of Booty: Modern Streetware.
fullspectrum

Duty Calls: Your Rouge State Needs You.
NMD

War And Peace: The Former.
www.mariokart64.com

NOT: WONDERBOY.
ResidentDrivel

SOCK PUPPETS: THE DEADENING.
regmcfly

You Will Purchase: This.
mistercrayon



***Mass Effect 2* was all it took to lure Marcus Waldock away from the delights of Xbox Live**

I read and enjoyed Adam Saunders' letter [**E**214] and hope he is enjoying his shiny new DSi. I myself have a similar (if slightly longer) gaming history as I am 43, also with a (long-suffering) wife but no mortgage or children. I too have been caught up in the *Modern Warfare* online juggernaut. Having dabbled with Xbox Live via various *Project Gotham Racings*, it wasn't until I became hooked on Infinity Ward's multiplayer opus that I really got into the scene.

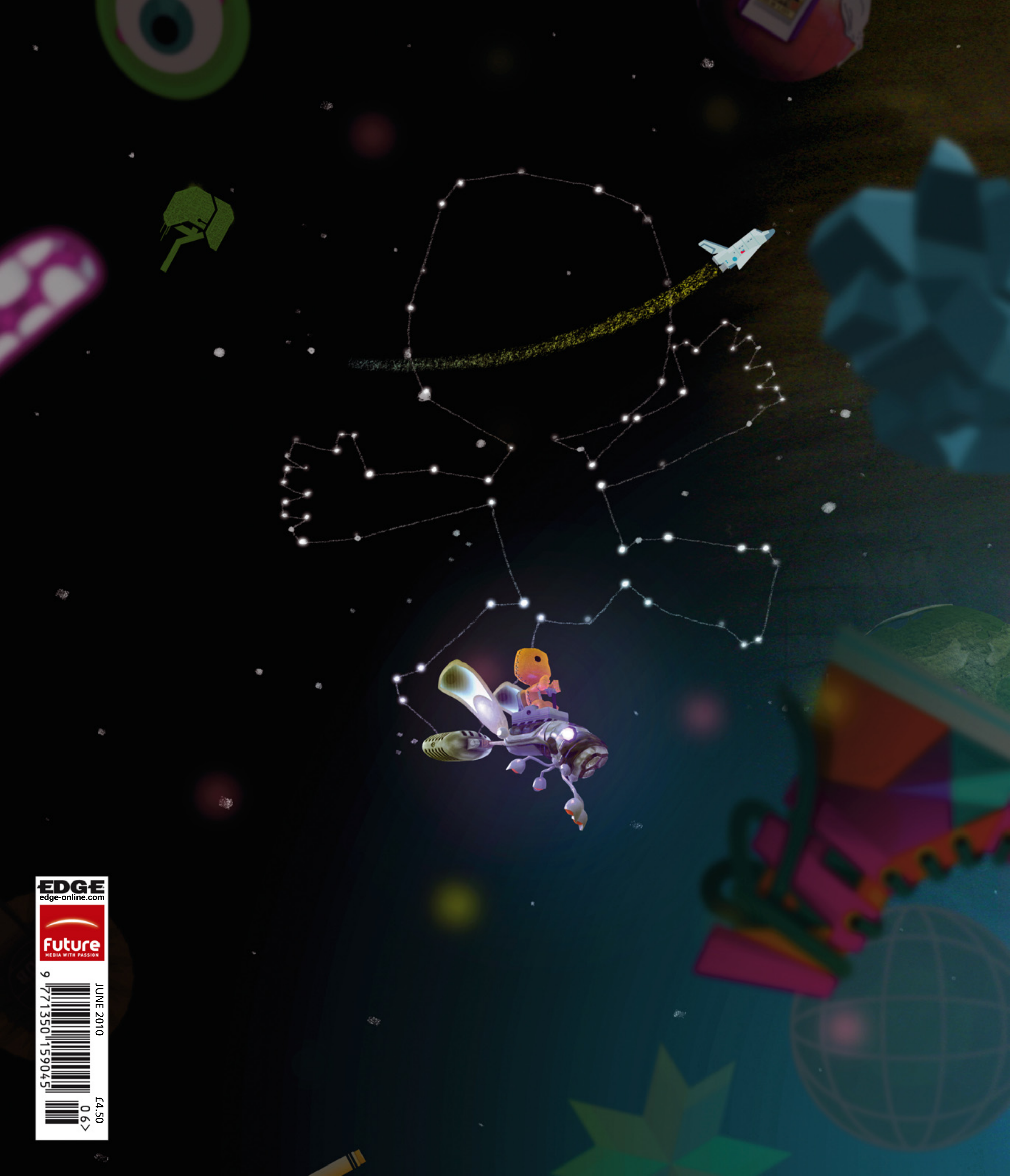
Much discussion with my online companions, and work colleagues who are similarly hooked, revolves around killstreaks, kill/death ratios and winning streaks. Then another game came along and my multiplayer antics stopped dead, the language coming from my gaming room (the loft, actually) subsided, my online pals thought I had croaked it, and my wife actually asked me who Jacob was. Apparently, I kept telling him to "go away" as I disliked his character immensely after my sexual advances were shunned (I would like to point out I was playing as a female character). If you hadn't guessed already, I'm talking about BioWare's magnificent *Mass Effect 2*. I'm on my fifth (or is it sixth?) playthrough, the last being on the incredible, heart-stopping Insanity difficulty level, and do you know what? I'm still finding stuff to do! There are rich, well-thought-out characters, humour, sacrifice, great dialogue and a proper 30-hour+ campaign if you see and do everything.

The perfect antidote to any multiplayer malaise, then. Plus, once you get the Salarian to sing Gilbert and Sullivan to you, the world will seem a much brighter place.
Marcus Waldock

Send us email **(edge@futurenet.com)**, using 'Inbox' as the subject line. Or send a letter to this address: Inbox, **Edge**, Future Publishing, 30 Monmouth Street, Bath BA1 2BW


Edge 216
on sale June 17




EDGE
edge-online.com
Future
MEDIA WITH PASSION
JUNE 2010
£4.50
9 771350 159045
06